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queer history and the palimpsest in the fiction of
Sarah Waters**

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Citation: Easton, Rosalind (2021) 'The spectres of past lessons, imperfectly erased': queer history and the palimpsest in the fiction of Sarah Waters. [Thesis] (Unpublished)

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**‘The spectres of past lessons, imperfectly erased’:
Queer History and the Palimpsest in the Fiction of
Sarah Waters**

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Thesis submitted for the degree of PhD

Birkbeck College, University of London

July 2020

Acknowledgements

I would like to extend sincere thanks to my supervisor, Professor Heike Bauer, for her invaluable support and guidance during this project.

Abstract

This thesis examines the queer historical fiction of Sarah Waters through the metaphor of the palimpsest. Waters' fiction is specifically concerned with female same-sex lives in the past, with a historical focus ranging from the mid-nineteenth century in her earlier novels to the post-WWII period in her more recent work. Critics have examined Waters' engagement with queer history in relation to the gender and sexual politics of her novels and the contribution they make to the development of the historiographic metafiction genre. I turn to the notion of the palimpsest – now well established as a literary and cultural metaphor – to theorise Waters' approach to the past, arguing that it complicates our understanding of the historiographic work she undertakes in her fiction. In Chapter 1, I develop the concept of the 'damaged palimpsest', considering how the preoccupation with domestic decay and neglect in her more recent novels *The Night Watch* (2006), *The Little Stranger* (2009) and *The Paying Guests* (2014) can be understood in relation to late twentieth- and early twenty-first century queer shame discourses. In Chapter 2, I frame a discussion of palimpsestic processes of cataloguing and collecting around my original archival research into the nineteenth-century bibliography of pornography represented in *Fingersmith* (2002). Chapter 3 considers the overlap between the textuality and materiality of history in Waters' twentieth-century-set fiction to examine how history is sedimented in a number of objects that move through time and space in these novels. Finally, in Chapter 4, I develop the concept of the three-dimensional 'liquid' palimpsest to explore Waters' representations of darkness in *Tipping the Velvet* (1998), *Affinity* (1999), *The Night Watch* and *The Paying Guests*, arguing that while accounts of queer lives and experiences can sometimes be sunk and submerged rather than merely lost, queer history also has its own blind spots. In the conclusion, I turn to the stage and screen adaptations of Waters' work to highlight how her novels continue to be caught up in palimpsestic processes of the sedimentation and compacting of their own histories.

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Introduction

Sarah Waters as a writer of queer historical fiction: 1998-2020

And then there was the plot itself – because, oh dear, how lurid it sounded, above all how niche, the tale of a Victorian oyster girl who loses her heart to a male impersonator, becomes her partner in bed and on the music hall stage, and then, cruelly abandoned, has a spell as a cross-dressed Piccadilly prostitute and the sexual plaything of a rich older woman before finding true love and redemption with an East End socialist.¹

Sarah Waters' brilliantly memorable distillation of *Tipping the Velvet*'s (1998) plot, written twenty years after its publication, captures both the bawdy, picaresque appeal of her debut novel and its distance from the late-1990s literary mainstream.² Over the last two decades, Waters has achieved considerable commercial success as a writer of queer historical fiction, something that seemed unlikely in 1998, when the genre was associated with queer and lesbian subcultures. Her initial hopes – 'that lesbians might like it' – were modest, but she has recently observed that her writing career 'has coincided almost exactly with enormous changes in the lives of British lesbian and gay people, who now have equal rights with heterosexuals as partners, parents and employees, and enjoy a mainstream cultural presence'.³ At the time of writing, Waters has published six novels, five of which have been adapted for the screen, with the most recent, *The Little Stranger* (2009), receiving an Oscar nomination for best adapted screenplay.⁴ Peter Kemp of *The Sunday Times* called her sixth novel, *The Paying Guests*

¹ Sarah Waters, 'It was an electric time to be gay: Sarah Waters on twenty years of *Tipping the Velvet*', *Guardian Review*, 20th January 2018, p. 37.

² Sarah Waters, *Tipping the Velvet* (London: Virago, 2002).

³ Waters, 'It was an electric time to be gay', p. 37.

⁴ Sarah Waters, *The Little Stranger* (London: Virago, 2009).

(2014), a work ‘of ambitious reach and triumphant accomplishment’;⁵ in June 2019 she was made an OBE for services to literature.⁶ The last of these achievements marks Waters’ entrance to the cultural establishment, and serves as a reminder that she was ushered from the margins to the mainstream some time ago. Although it is not within the scope of this project to consider the cultural mainstreaming of LGBTQI+ writing in the last twenty years, Waters’ commercial popularity is a factor in the growth in scholarship on her work during the same period.

The palimpsest, which I discuss in detail later in the introduction, is a literary and historical metaphor that has developed from the notion of palaeographic palimpsests. These are written texts from which the first inscription has been erased to allow for reinscription, with the ‘erased’ layer reappearing through the surface layer over time. This sense of hiddenness, of that which has been deliberately concealed making itself known again, seems to say much about the relationship between mainstream history and queer history. It is in these terms that I reinvigorate the palimpsest as a methodological tool in order to reconceptualise Waters’ approach to and engagement with the queer past, considering the twenty-first century tension between queer shame and gay pride discourses, the implications of patriarchal pornographic and bibliographic practices for the establishment of a legitimate lesbian literary erotic tradition, and the interplay between the textuality and materiality of history in Waters’ novels. I also consider the extent to which queer history’s preoccupation with its own lostness or hiddenness paradoxically reveals its blind spots. Throughout the thesis, I acknowledge that the terms ‘queer’ and ‘lesbian’ cannot be used interchangeably: I use the former to tie in with current

⁵ Sarah Waters, *The Paying Guests* (London: Virago, 2014); Peter Kemp, *The Paying Guests* review, *The Sunday Times*, 24th August 2014 <<https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/the-paying-guests-by-sarah-waters-d0ftzw9pgq3>> [Accessed 8th September 2014].

⁶ *Western Telegraph*, 24th October 2019 <<https://www.westerntelegraph.co.uk/news/17991095.sarah-waters-received-obe-buckingham-palace-duke-cambridge/>> [Accessed 27th March 2020].

methodological debates, and the latter to draw attention to Waters' interest in particular aspects of female same-sex history.

As a queer historical novel about the shifting cultural construction of categories of sex and gender, the extent to which *Tipping the Velvet* anticipates the social and cultural changes in the lives of LGBTQI+ people in the last twenty years might seem remarkable – but this can be explained by Waters' knowledge of the development of modern sexuality since the late nineteenth century, acquired through her 1995 PhD thesis on lesbian and gay historical fiction.⁷ Mariaconcetta Costantini argues that the Victorian setting of *Tipping the Velvet* and *Affinity* (1999) is 'a conscious choice of a historical moment in which contemporary discourses of economics, politics and sexuality have their roots.'⁸ Just as the late nineteenth century was a pivotal cultural moment in the history of gender and sexuality, so too was the late twentieth century. The theorist most closely associated with the emergence of discourses of sexuality in the late nineteenth century is Michel Foucault, who coined the term 'repressive hypothesis' to refer to the way the apparent cultural repression of sexuality has the paradoxical effect of bringing it into discourse.⁹ As Jeremy Bristow observes, Foucault has, despite criticism that he '[treats] eroticism as if it were separate from gender [...], inspired a later generation of feminist and queer theorists to confront the cultural interests served by the meanings ascribed to sexual desire.'¹⁰ Bristow refers here to Judith Butler, Gayle Rubin and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, all of whom have produced work influential in the writing of this thesis, and all of whom share

⁷ Sarah Waters, 'Wolfskins and togas: lesbian and gay historical fiction 1870 – present'. Unpublished PhD thesis (University of London, 1995).

⁸ Sarah Waters, *Affinity* (London: Virago, 2002); Mariaconcetta Costantini, "'Faux-Victorian Melodrama' in the New Millennium: The Case of Sarah Waters", *Critical Survey* 18 (2006), p. 36.

⁹ Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality Volume 1: The Will to Knowledge* (London: Penguin, 1998, translated from the French by Robert Hurley), p. 15.

¹⁰ Jeremy Bristow, *Sexuality* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2011), p. 9.

Waters' interest in troubling 'essentialist definitions of what it means to be male or female, masculine or feminine, heterosexual or homosexual.'¹¹

Matt Cook argues that there was, by the late 1990s, 'the beginning of a cultural shift and a recession in the frantic homophobia of the late 1980s.'¹² He cites the election of Chris Smith as the first openly gay cabinet minister, the lifting of restrictions on gay fostering and adoption, and equal immigration rights as significant moments that signalled a shift in ideas and attitudes, but also acknowledges the concern of some gay people that 'gay culture was being contained through its integration into a consumerist ethic and mainstream culture.'¹³ (I argue in Chapter 4 of this thesis that – despite Waters' celebration of the advances in LGBTQI+ rights cited earlier in this introduction – her novels question whether the joy of secrecy and hiding is something that has been lost in a climate of much greater visibility and acceptance.) The early years of Waters' writing career thus coincided with 'a sense of schizophrenia' in which substantial progress had been made in securing legal and civil rights, but 'homophobia endured and was entrenched, and some felt that homosexuality was being accepted on decidedly straight terms.'¹⁴

As the title of his book suggests, Matt Cook is writing specifically about the history of gay male sexuality; the history of lesbian sexuality, with which Waters' novels are concerned, is rather different. Emily Hamer points out that 'gay men have always had easier access to the formation of social identity than lesbians have had, because they have always had the privileges

¹¹ Bristow, *Sexuality*, p. 9.

¹² Matt Cook, 'From Gay Reform to Gaydar, 1967 – 2006' in *A Gay History of Britain: Love and Sex Between Men Since the Middle Ages*, ed. by Matt Cook, with H G Cocks, Robert Mills and Randolph Trumbach (Oxford: Greenwood World Publishing, 2007), p. 211.

¹³ Cook, *A Gay History of Britain*, p. 212.

¹⁴ Cook, *A Gay History of Britain*, p. 212.

that go with being a man.’¹⁵ (Waters makes a similar argument in relation to lesbian historical fiction in an essay co-authored with Laura Doan, which I draw on at length in this thesis.)¹⁶ Hamer argues that lesbian history – which she describes as the history of women for whom ‘their lesbianism has not been written into their lives’ – lies ‘outside [the] realm of [the] quasi-official documentation’ that records ‘what people did in the public sphere’.¹⁷ In their overview of lesbian history since the late eighteenth century, Alison Oram and Annmarie Turnbull highlight further differences between gay male history and female same-sex history, pointing out that ‘for much of the nineteenth century’ the female ‘romantic friendship’ was accepted, even celebrated, with no suspicion of a physical or sexual relationship.¹⁸ They argue that, in contrast:

The end of the [nineteenth] century is associated with a more scientific delineation of sexualities, especially deviant practices such as homosexuality, presenting the opportunity for clearer social and self-defined identities to emerge. There was an increasingly full and explicit discussion of female homosexuality in the twentieth century [...]. Political organising from the early 1960s paved the way for the emergence of the radical gay liberation and women’s liberation movements in 1968-70.¹⁹

This reveals that the period from the end of the nineteenth century until thirty years before the publication of *Tipping the Velvet* is one in which the lesbian as a cultural phenomenon moved

¹⁵ Emily Hamer, *Britannia’s Glory: A History of Twentieth-Century Lesbians* (London: Cassell, 1996), p. 6.

¹⁶ Laura Doan and Sarah Waters, ‘Making up lost time: contemporary lesbian writing and the invention of history’, in *Territories of Desire in Queer Culture*, ed. by David Alderson and Linda Anderson (Manchester University Press, 2000).

¹⁷ Hamer, *Britannia’s Glory*, p. 1, p. 4.

¹⁸ Alison Oram and Annmarie Turnbull, *The Lesbian History Sourcebook: Love and Sex Between Women from 1780 to 1970* (London: Routledge, 2011), p. 3.

¹⁹ Oram and Turnbull, *The Lesbian History Sourcebook*, p. 3.

from invisibility to visibility.²⁰ Rita Felski argues that the gay rights movements of the 1960s and 1970s led to ‘the rediscovery of sexology’ in the 1990s and ‘a growing interest in constructing a history and tradition of same-sex desire.’²¹ *Tipping the Velvet* would not have been possible without these developments in the emergence of modern sexuality, and particularly not without this desire to construct a lesbian history: as Jerome de Groot argues, there is a clear link between Waters’ academic work on lesbian history and the project of recovery and recuperation she undertakes in her novels.²²

Critical contexts

Scholarship on Waters has grown steadily since the early 2000s, with three books focusing on her work published in the last seven years. The first of these, *Contemporary Critical Perspectives: Sarah Waters* (2013), edited by Kaye Mitchell, takes in a range of material that broadly encompasses the main areas of interest in Waters scholarship.²³ Rebecca Pohl argues that Waters’ second novel *Affinity* constructs space and sexuality as relational networks where sexuality is a certain way of inhabiting space; Natasha Alden explores the 1940s intertextual references in *The Night Watch* (2006);²⁴ Monica Germanà assesses the influence of Charlotte Brontë’s *Jane Eyre* and Daphne du Maurier’s *Rebecca* on *The Little Stranger*, arguing that Waters’ novel combines nineteenth-century social realism with an interest in the supernatural.²⁵

²⁰ Laura Doan identifies 1928 – the year of the obscenity trial of Radclyffe Hall’s novel *The Well of Loneliness* – as a turning point in the creation of the modern lesbian, something I consider in Chapter 1. See Laura Doan, *Fashioning Sapphism: The Origins of a Modern English Lesbian Culture* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001), p. xii.

²¹ Rita Felski, introduction to *Sexology in Culture*, ed. by Lucy Bland and Laura Doan (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1998), p. 4.

²² Jerome de Groot, ‘“Something New and a Bit Startling”: Sarah Waters and the Historical Novel’ in *Sarah Waters: Contemporary Critical Perspectives*, ed. by Kaye Mitchell (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), p. 58.

²³ Mitchell, *Contemporary Critical Perspectives*.

²⁴ Sarah Waters, *The Night Watch* (London: Virago, 2011).

²⁵ Rebecca Pohl, ‘Sexing the Labyrinth: Space and Sexuality in Sarah Waters’ *Affinity*, p. 29; Natasha Alden, ‘“Possibility, Pleasure and Peril”: *The Night Watch* as a Very Literary History’; Monica Germanà, ‘The Death

The second edited collection, *Sarah Waters and Contemporary Feminisms*, edited by Adele Jones and Claire O'Callaghan and published three years later in 2016, reflects the developments in Waters scholarship in the intervening period, with Jessica Gildersleeve reading *The Night Watch* and *The Little Stranger* through Luce Irigaray's work on *déréliction*, and Louisa Yates identifying the parallels between Waters' fiction and contemporary feminist political activism.²⁶ To date, the only full-length book on Waters written by a sole author is Claire O'Callaghan's *Sarah Waters: Gender and Sexual Politics* (2017). O'Callaghan's research is concerned chiefly with the tension between feminist and queer theoretical perspectives in Waters' fiction and in responses to her work. Among other things, O'Callaghan considers Waters' representations of masculinity in *The Little Stranger*, and how her most recent novel *The Paying Guests* expresses 'a suspicion towards the politics of masculine domination' in the context of both its historical setting (post-First World War) and the current political, social and cultural climate.²⁷

In other responses, there is a similar interest in how Waters' novels engage with and respond to queer and feminist discourses. In her work on *The Night Watch*, Adele Jones draws together the work of feminist geographer Doreen Massey and queer scholar Jack Halberstam. Massey argues that 'time/space' is a formal dualism, in which 'time' is masculinised and privileged, and 'space' is feminised and thus defined by absence; therefore, if the gender produced by time/space is to be 'released from its own duality', it should instead be reconceptualised as 'space-time'.²⁸ Halberstam, Jones argues, goes slightly further than Massey in calling for the

of the Lady: Haunted Garments and (Re-)Possession in *The Little Stranger*', p. 114, all in *Contemporary Critical Perspectives*, ed. by Mitchell.

²⁶ Jessica Gildersleeve, 'Anxious Affinities: Gender and *Déréliction* in Sarah Waters' Neo-Forties Novels'; Louisa Yates, 'My Dress is Not a Yes': Coalitions of Resistance in SlutWalk and the Fictions of Sarah Waters', both in *Sarah Waters and Contemporary Feminisms*, ed. by Adele Jones and Claire O'Callaghan (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016).

²⁷ Claire O'Callaghan, *Sarah Waters: Gender and Sexual Politics* (London: Bloomsbury, 2017), p. 156.

²⁸ Jones, 'Disrupting the Continuum', p. 33.

queering of the time/space dichotomy. Jones argues that *The Night Watch*, with its reverse chronology and preoccupation with the materiality of bomb-damaged buildings, similarly affords new ways of thinking about and conceptualising time and space.²⁹ More recently, Jones offers a new critical angle on Waters' work by reading *Fingersmith* (2002) through the psychoanalytical theories of Julia Kristeva, asserting that Waters 'has not been written about much outside the parameters' of lesbian/lesbian-feminist and queer theory, 'both of which are often viewed as a direct antithesis to traditional and contemporary psychoanalytic frameworks.'³⁰ Kaye Mitchell shares with Adele Jones both her status as a Waters critic who has co-edited a collection of responses to her work and an interest in ideas about time in *The Night Watch*: in her own chapter in *Contemporary Critical Perspectives: Sarah Waters*, Mitchell examines the treatment of time in the novel, both as a theme and in terms of the backwards structure of the narrative, arguing that Waters problematises the 'naturalness' of time.³¹ Elsewhere, Mitchell has also called into question the categorising of Waters' novels as historiographic metafiction – a key thread in Waters scholarship, as I shall show later – and evaluated the oppressive potential of the archive in *Fingersmith*.³² The latter chapter has proved particularly important in the writing of the second chapter of this PhD.

Ann Heilmann has made a leading contribution to understanding Waters' work in the context of the rise of neo-Victorianism. In 'Doing It With Mirrors: Neo-Victorian Metatextual Magic in *Affinity*, *The Prestige* and *The Illusionist*', she acknowledges the sophistication and knowing cleverness of neo-Victorianism as 'a sub-genre of postmodernism', arguing that 'neo-

²⁹ Jones, 'Disrupting the Continuum', p. 34.

³⁰ Sarah Waters, *Fingersmith* (London: Virago, 2003); Adele Jones, 'The Feminist Politics of Textuality: Reading the Feminism of Julia Kristeva in *Fingersmith*' in *Sarah Waters and Contemporary Feminisms*, ed. by Adele Jones and Claire O'Callaghan (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), p. 115.

³¹ Kaye Mitchell, "'What does it feel like to be an anachronism?'" Time in *The Night Watch*' in *Contemporary Critical Perspectives*, p. 88.

³² Kaye Mitchell, "'That library of uncatalogued pleasure": Queerness, Desire and the Archive in Contemporary Gay Fiction', in *Libraries, Literatures and Archives*, ed. by Sas Mays (London: Routledge, 2014).

Victorianism, when at its most sophisticated, is self-referential, engaging the reader [...] in a game about its historical veracity and (intra/inter)textuality, and inviting reflections on its metafictional playfulness.’³³ In relation to Linda Hutcheon’s definition of historiographic metafiction – which I discuss below – neo-Victorianism thus becomes a genre in which ‘the essential constructedness of history and historiography’ are dramatised.³⁴ This, argues Heilmann, makes the neo-Victorian author into ‘a conjuror’, for whom ‘showing while hiding’ is a magic trick that deceives not only characters, but also the reader.³⁵ In Waters’ second novel *Affinity*, this deception is threefold: Ruth and Selina make other characters unwittingly complicit in the hiding, and therefore the ‘enabling’, of their lesbian relationship; Margaret, the protagonist, is tricked by both women into helping Selina escape from prison so she can flee the country with Ruth; and the reader is persuaded to suspend her disbelief and wonder if Selina’s supernatural trickery might be real after all.³⁶ As I consider later in this introduction, Jerome de Groot argues that Waters’ work revitalises historical fiction as a genre;³⁷ Heilmann’s article reveals that Waters elevates neo-Victorianism as a sub-genre, making it into something ‘sustained by illusion’ and the magician-like sleight-of-hand of the author.³⁸ Responses to Waters’ work that consider the intertexts in her twentieth-century-set novels usually focus on the influence of 1940s fiction on *The Night Watch*.³⁹ Heilmann, however, argues that Waters’ engagement with neo-Victorianism continues with her fifth novel *The Little Stranger*, set in 1947 but influenced by ‘a dual historical framework’ that takes in ‘the Victorians and the 1940s’.⁴⁰ The effect of this is that even with ‘its 1940s setting *The Little Stranger* connects

³³ Ann Heilmann, ‘Doing It With Mirrors: Neo-Victorian Metatextual Magic in *Affinity*, *The Prestige* and *The Illusionist*’, *Neo Victorian Studies* 2 (2010), p. 18.

³⁴ Heilmann, ‘Doing it With Mirrors’, p. 18.

³⁵ Heilmann, ‘Doing it With Mirrors’, p. 19.

³⁶ Heilmann, ‘Doing it With Mirrors’, pp. 25-26.

³⁷ de Groot, ‘Something New and a Bit Startling’, p. 59.

³⁸ Heilmann, ‘Doing it With Mirrors’, p. 18.

³⁹ See Alden, ‘Possibility, Pleasure and Peril’, and Gildersleeve, ‘Anxious Affinities’.

⁴⁰ Ann Heilmann, ‘Specters of the Victorian in the Neo-Forties Novel: Sarah Waters’s *The Little Stranger* and Its Intertexts’, *Contemporary Women’s Writing* 6 (2012), p. 39.

neo-Victorian Gothic with the postwar imagination.’⁴¹ Heilmann’s work thus further expands the definition of neo-Victorianism, arguing that the spectral presence of Victorian literary culture – the haunted house, the fallen family dynasty – is such that it can continue to ‘haunt’ novels set in a much later period.⁴²

Sarah Waters as historiographer: The relationship between her critical and creative work

Elsewhere, scholarly attention has focused on certain key aspects of Waters’ fiction. The first of these is the question of what her novels actually *are*, in terms of how they can be categorised as historical fiction, historiographic metafiction, or something else. The overwhelming majority of responses to Waters’ work consider this question to some extent, and for a sizeable number it is the focus of inquiry. The point from which any assessment of the scholarship in this area must start is not a particular response or group of responses to the novels themselves, but Waters’ own academic work: her PhD on lesbian and gay historical fiction and subsequent critical work are closely linked to her creative work, not just in the way her knowledge of lesbian and gay literature and gender and sexuality theory is so obviously rooted in sustained academic study, but because one of her publications in particular sets out the historiographic project that she undertakes in her fiction.⁴³ In ‘Making up lost time’, Laura Doan and Waters argue that a coherent, legitimate literary and cultural inheritance is necessary for the formation of a queer subjectivity in the present, but that this is easier for gay men than lesbians, because the high watermarks of gay male culture and mainstream Western culture are sometimes the same (Plato, Michelangelo, Shakespeare, Oscar Wilde).⁴⁴ I follow Jerome de Groot in using

⁴¹ Heilmann, ‘Specters of the Victorian’, p. 40.

⁴² Heilmann, ‘Specters of the Victorian’, p. 40.

⁴³ de Groot, ‘Something New and a Bit Startling’, p. 62.

⁴⁴ Doan and Waters, ‘Making up lost time’, p. 12.

the term ‘historiographic intervention’ to describe Waters’ fiction in this thesis because it can be seen as the means by which she puts into action the project she sets out in ‘Making up lost time’. De Groot reads Waters’ fiction through her academic work, arguing that her fiction contributes to and develops not just the historical fiction genre itself, but also the debates around it.⁴⁵

Natasha Alden says of Doan and Waters’ work that the late twentieth century is ‘the first time that it’s been possible to narrate lesbian history so openly, and for writers to publicly draw connections between themselves and gay women in the past.’⁴⁶ Diana Wallace insists that Waters’ recurring use of the word ‘queer’ in her fiction ‘[signals] her recreation of a repressed lesbian past and the way in which this project alters, or indeed ‘queers’ (puts out of order) our perceptions of history.’⁴⁷ Much has been written in the scholarship on Waters about her purpose as a writer of historical fiction, but something that recurs is the idea that she seeks to insert that which is unknown into the historical record, with Alden arguing that Waters’ work ‘fill[s] in the blanks’ of lesbian history.⁴⁸ Mariaconcetta Costantini similarly argues that Waters ‘[fills] in the many gaps by imagining missing details, events and emotions’.⁴⁹ There are, however, dissenting voices: Rachel Carroll, for example, argues that *Affinity* ultimately suggests that the blanks cannot be ‘filled in’: because the novel ‘can be read as a fantastic fictional evocation of [...] the historical ‘invisibility’ of lesbian identity’, it ‘refuses to satisfy the desire of the contemporary reader for the retrospective materialisation into late Victorian existence of lesbian identity.’⁵⁰ Jerome de Groot provides the strongest rejection of the use of phrases like

⁴⁵ de Groot, ‘Something New and a Bit Startling’, p. 59.

⁴⁶ Natasha Alden, *Reading Behind the Lines: Postmemory in Contemporary British War Fiction* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2014), p. 180.

⁴⁷ Diana Wallace, *Female Gothic Histories* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2013), p. 163.

⁴⁸ Alden, ‘Possibility, Pleasure and Peril’, p. 70.

⁴⁹ Costantini, ‘Faux-Victorian Melodrama’, p. 20.

⁵⁰ Rachel Carroll, ‘“Becoming My Own Ghost”: Spinsterhood, Heterosexuality and Sarah Waters’ *Affinity*’, *Genders* 45 (2007)

‘filling in the gaps’, arguing instead for an approach that acknowledges the clear link between her critical and creative work:

Waters’ critical work, to an extent, participates in a wider critical shift towards engaging with the historical novel as a complex and important form; her creative work [...] contributes to a contemporary reinvigorating (possibly even reinventing) of the form [...] Her fiction seeks to reflect this critical development and contribution, as her novels address complex issues rather than simply debating the logic of representing the past.⁵¹

De Groot’s argument here implies that the complexity of Waters’ fiction, together with the way in which it revitalises the historical novel as a form, exposes the relative simplicity of the ‘fill in the gaps’ approach. De Groot directly addresses the tendency to view Waters’ work in these terms, insisting that ‘Waters’ own novelistic practice [...] needs to be seen’ within the ‘critical framework’ of her academic work with Laura Doan.⁵² This essay alone, de Groot argues, confirms that Waters’ novels are doing much more than ‘refocusing attention on the previously marginalised’; instead, they ‘work backwards and forwards, commenting upon contemporary lesbian identity and the reworkings of sexuality in modernity’.⁵³ (This echoes Mark Llewellyn’s much earlier argument that *Affinity* should be understood as ‘a modern interpretation of gendered Victorian social norms which looks backwards for its setting but also to the present for its wider implications.’)⁵⁴ Jessica Gildersleeve and Nike Sulway oppose

<<https://www.colorado.edu/gendersarchive1998-2013/2007/03/01/becoming-my-own-ghost-spinsterhood-heterosexuality-and-sarah-waterss-affinity>> [accessed 4th July 2020].

⁵¹ de Groot, ‘Something New and a Bit Startling’, p. 59.

⁵² de Groot, ‘Something New and a Bit Startling’, p. 62.

⁵³ de Groot, ‘Something New and a Bit Startling’, p. 62.

⁵⁴ Mark Llewellyn, “‘Queer! I should say it is criminal!’ Sarah Waters’ *Affinity*”, *Journal of Gender Studies* 13 (2004), p. 204.

the ‘filling in the gaps’ argument less directly, describing Waters’ novels as ‘revisionist historical fiction’ which ‘can be seen as attempts to revise our understandings of history by insisting that the stories we know are not the only stories that took place.’⁵⁵ This approach highlights not only ‘the possibility of lesbian desire’ in the past, but also alerts the reader to ‘the impossibility of that desire being represented in the genres of the time.’⁵⁶ I suggest here that the ‘fill in the gaps’ argument is a fairly straightforward way of conceptualising how Waters *does* represent lesbian desire in her fiction, in that it does seem precisely as though she inserts into the genre of lesbian historical fiction that which has been previously elided or erased. What de Groot’s argument elucidates, however, is that this approach does not account for the complexity of Waters’ approach to the past.

Waters’ fiction in relation to Linda Hutcheon’s definition of historiographic metafiction

This tension in the scholarship on Waters leads to the issue of how critics have found that her novels resist categorisation. To return to de Groot:

Scholarship on the historical novel form has long been interested in questions of definition, rather than more complex questions of aesthetics, formal innovation or implication. [...] Critics have spent so long arguing about what it *is* that they have had precious little to think about what it might do, and what it might contain.⁵⁷

The preoccupation with ‘questions of definition’ in responses to Waters’ work might suggest that her novels are treated in much the same way as those for which ‘questions of aesthetics,

⁵⁵ Jessica Gildersleeve and Nike Sulway, ‘The Violent Pacifist: Ethics and Disorder in Sarah Waters’ *The Paying Guests*’, *English* 68 (2019), p. 87.

⁵⁶ Gildersleeve and Sulway, ‘The Violent Pacifist’, p. 87.

⁵⁷ de Groot, ‘Something New and a Bit Startling’, p. 59.

formal innovation or implication' are overlooked. While the scholarship on Waters does consider what her novels 'might do, and what [they] might contain', it is also true that the issue of how to define her work in relation to existing categories forms a fairly dominant strand in Waters criticism. De Groot also cites Waters' PhD thesis, in which she points out that 'preoccupation with the *form* of the historical novel [...] has obstructed analysis of its content.'⁵⁸ In responses to Waters' creative work, this preoccupation is concerned with how far her novels adhere to Linda Hutcheon's definition of historiographic metafiction, a model that has had considerable influence on Waters scholars. For Hutcheon, historiographic metafiction incorporates literature, history, and theory, so that 'its theoretical self-awareness of history and fiction as human constructs [...] is made the grounds for its rethinking and reworking of all the forms and contents of the past.'⁵⁹ John Fowles' *The French Lieutenant's Woman* (1969), in which 'the modernist tradition of the more 'open' ending is both used and abused by postmodern self-consciously multiple endings', is cited by Hutcheon as an early exemplar of historiographic metafiction.⁶⁰ Unlike Fowles, Waters does not make use of devices such as contemporary frames or intrusive authorial voices, which has presented something of a conundrum to those responding to her work: if her novels are *not* historiographic metafiction, then what are they, and why might there be such a pressing need to allocate her novels to one category or another?

For Kate Mitchell, devices such as contemporary frames serve to distance the reader from the historical setting of the novel.⁶¹ In this sense, Waters is quite different from other contemporary historical fiction writers who do make use of framing devices, like A S Byatt and Graham

⁵⁸ Sarah Waters, 'Wolfskins and togas: lesbian and gay historical fictions, 1870 to the present'. Unpublished PhD thesis, University of London (1995), quoted in de Groot, 'Something New and a Bit Startling', p. 59.

⁵⁹ Linda Hutcheon, *A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction* (London: Routledge, 1988), p. 5.

⁶⁰ Hutcheon, *A Poetics of Postmodernism*, p. 59.

⁶¹ Kate Mitchell, *History and Cultural Memory in Neo-Victorian Fiction* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), p. 104.

Swift.⁶² Beth Palmer argues that the use of different fonts for Margaret's and Selina's diaries in *Affinity* performs a similar metafictional function, highlighting the materiality of the printed text, and that Margaret's surname (Prior) hints that the novel is writing back to a moment in the past.⁶³ Mark Wormald also picks up on this clue in *Affinity*, linking Margaret's surname to Waters' 'prior' knowledge of the Victorians.⁶⁴ The idea that Waters' work 'writes back' to an earlier historical moment is also present in the work of Louisa Yates, who cites Adrienne Rich's feminist notion of 're-vision' – 'the act of looking back, of seeing with fresh eyes, of entering an old text from a new critical direction' – in conceptualising Waters' approach to the past.⁶⁵ Yates' argument focuses on the disruptive or radical political imperative of historical fiction in relation to Waters' work. Citing Linda Hutcheon's understanding of historiographic metafiction as 'a critical foundation on which politicised stylistics and marginal voices can proliferate', Yates contends that Waters re-imagines, or 're-vises', to use Rich's term, the relationship between text and hypo-text – in this case, between *Tipping the Velvet* and Chris Hunt's *Street Lavender* (1986).⁶⁶ The purpose of such a relationship is usually to expose the repressive nature of the hypo-text, but Waters instead selects a work of gay fiction that 'consistently rejects any identification as a canonical text.'⁶⁷ Although Yates' work chimes with that of other scholars in its insistence that Waters '[places] lesbians into a convincing nineteenth-century landscape' to '[provide] a satisfying lesbian historiography', it is not necessarily the case that neo-Victorian fiction must always be characterised by a desire to 'radicalise the relationship between text and history.'⁶⁸

⁶² Mitchell, *History and Cultural Memory*, p. 117.

⁶³ Beth Palmer, 'Are the Victorians Still with Us? Sensation Fiction and its Legacies in the Twenty-First Century', *Victorian Studies* 52 (2009), p. 91.

⁶⁴ Mark Wormald, 'Prior Knowledge: Sarah Waters and the Victorians' in *British Fiction Today*, ed. by Philip Tew and Rod Mengham (London: Continuum, 2006). p. 191.

⁶⁵ Adrienne Rich, 'When We Dead Awaken: Writing as Re-Vision', *College English* 34 (1972), p. 18.

⁶⁶ Louisa Yates, "'But it's only a novel, Dorian": Neo-Victorian Fiction and the Process of Re-Vision', *Neo-Victorian Studies* 2 (2009 – 2010), p. 187. It is worth noting here that Chris Hunt is a heterosexual female writer of fiction for gay men.

⁶⁷ Yates, 'But it's only a novel', p. 194.

⁶⁸ Yates, 'But it's only a novel', p. 188.

Some responses to history and historiography in Waters' fiction explicitly reject existing categories – historical fiction, historiographic metafiction – and reconceptualise her work beyond these parameters. Norman Jones, for example, is less concerned with the need to categorise Waters' work according to the conventions of historiographic metafiction, and more interested in the recuperative potential suggested by representations of lesbian sex in *Tipping the Velvet*: he argues that 'the narrative suggests that the exploration of lesbian history can effect the same kind of unpredictable, transformational encounter with the limits of the known' as that brought about by Nancy's experience of lesbian desire for Kitty.⁶⁹ In her work on *Affinity*, Marie-Luise Kohlke devises a new term to describe Waters' fiction:

The pseudo-Victorian *Affinity* harks back to nineteenth-century realism but circumvents the standard built-in reticence on unpalatable and/or taboo subjects of the time, so that initially it seems to reflect Victorian reality more comprehensively and thus more authentically than 'genuine' Victorian literature, adopting what might be called a *new (meta)realism*. Such new (meta)realist fiction, however, remains resolutely silent on its own fictionality, presenting itself as paradoxically *more real* than the thing it imitates.⁷⁰

Kohlke uses the term 'pseudo-Victorian', rather than 'neo-Victorian' here; the former is useful in highlighting the genre's imitative elements, but throughout the thesis I favour the more critically established 'neo-Victorian'. Ann Heilmann and Mark Llewellyn note that the term 'has been widely adopted in academic studies in favour of the earlier 'post-Victorian' (presumably because of its potential ahistoricity) and 'retro'/'faux-Victorian', which imply an

⁶⁹ Norman Jones, *Gay and Lesbian Historical Fiction: Sexual Mystery and Post-Secular Narrative* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), p. 97.

⁷⁰ Marie-Luise Kohlke, 'Into History through the Back Door: The 'Past Historic' in *Nights at the Circus* and *Affinity*', *Women: A Cultural Review* 15 (2004), p. 156. Italics in original.

overt nostalgia for the period.’⁷¹ They argue that the significance of ‘neo-Victorian’ should be ‘reclaim[ed]’ as ‘more than just a short-hand indication of style, period or costume’:⁷²

[J]ust as not all narratives published between 1837 and 1901 are Victorian, so all fictions post-1901 that happen to have a Victorian setting or re-write a Victorian text or a Victorian character do not have to be neo-Victorian; indeed, we would argue that many of them cannot be identified so precisely because they fall quite clearly into the category of historical fiction set in the nineteenth century rather than being texts about the metahistoric and metacultural ramifications of such historical engagement.⁷³

As I show throughout the thesis how Waters’ novels are indeed ‘texts about the metahistoric and metacultural ramifications’ of a nineteenth-century setting, I am satisfied that the term ‘neo-Victorian’ is an appropriate one to ascribe to her fiction.

Kohlke’s notion of Waters’ fiction as ‘a new (meta) realism’ implies that while her work has elements of historiographic metafiction, it is also, by virtue of its capacity to be ‘paradoxically *more real* than the thing it imitates’, something else altogether. The article further argues that this indicates that the disruptive or troubling potential of historiographic metafiction has been exhausted, and that writers like Waters are instead more concerned with the resistance of history to revisionism or re-reading.⁷⁴ It is interesting that Kohlke implies here that this resistance is at odds with or in some other way not part of the genre of historiographic metafiction, particularly as Waters is a woman writer of historical fiction, and, moreover, one

⁷¹ Ann Heilmann and Mark Llewellyn, *Neo-Victorianism: The Victorians in the Twenty-First Century, 1999-2009* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), p. 5.

⁷² Heilmann and Llewellyn, *Neo-Victorianism*, p. 6.

⁷³ Heilmann and Llewellyn, *Neo-Victorianism*, p. 6.

⁷⁴ Kohlke, ‘Into History through the Back Door’, p. 156.

concerned with drawing attention to female same-sex history. Ann Heilmann and Mark Llewellyn argue that it is women writers who are responsible for the elevation of historical fiction from ‘an essentially escapist form of literature with a predominant interest in the romantic into a genre at the cutting edge of the past and of contemporary worlds’, and that it is women for whom ‘the pleasures of reading and writing are arguably intensified when dealing with the historical.’⁷⁵ In a later article, they underline the ‘strong political resonance’ of historical fiction for ‘women and ethnic writers: the imperatives behind female and ethnic (re)writings of history are inescapably different from those of white men.’⁷⁶ Martin Paul Eve directly addresses the preoccupation with historiography in Waters’ scholarship, endorsing Kohlke’s concept of this ‘new (meta) realism’ and also arguing that ‘recently [...] there have been signs of the exhaustion of historiographic metafiction as a fictional mode.’⁷⁷ Instead, Eve asserts, *Affinity* is just one example of a type of historical fiction that metafictionally comments on its own genre, or on the nature of genre itself, in that its ‘plot twists rely upon readers’ conceptions and expectations of genre.’ Eve devises the term ‘taxonomographic metafiction’ to refer to ‘fiction about fiction that deals with the study/construction of genre/taxonomy’ and constitutes [...] a useful alternative means of classifying such works.’⁷⁸ Thus the continued debate around history and historiography in Waters’ novels underlines the extent to which they resist any stable categorisation in this sense.

⁷⁵ *Metafiction and Metahistory in Contemporary Women’s Writing*, ed. by Ann Heilmann and Mark Llewellyn (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), pp. 1-2.

⁷⁶ Ann Heilmann and Mark Llewellyn, ‘Hystorical fictions: Women (re)writing and (re)reading history’, *Women: A Cultural Review* 15 (2008), p. 142.

⁷⁷ Martin Paul Eve, “‘You will see the logic in the design of this’: From Historiography to Taxonomography in the Contemporary Metafiction of Sarah Waters’ *Affinity*”, *Neo-Victorian Studies* 6 (2012 – 2013), p. 107.

⁷⁸ Eve, ‘You will see the logic’, p. 106.

Gender and sexual politics in Waters' fiction

Just as all responses to Waters' work address, to some extent, the nature of her work as historical fiction, so too do they explore the gender and sexual politics of the novels. The focus here – particularly in early or relatively early responses – is on *Tipping the Velvet*, which signposts Waters' academic interest in and knowledge of gender and sexuality theory more obviously than any of her other novels. Stefania Ciocia argues that the novel owes more to the picaresque tradition than the *Bildungsroman*: Nancy has 'outsider' status, allowing her to observe from the margins, and her 'journey' does not involve any substantial psychological growth.⁷⁹ Instead, Nancy's character development takes place against the backdrop of the cityspace as a stage, so that she begins the novel as a spectator (when she watches Kitty's cross-dressing act and falls for her), then becomes a performer herself (both as Kitty's lover and as part of their double act on stage), before ending the novel as a director (when she finds happiness with social philanthropist Florence, but is not influenced by her political activism; rather, Nancy uses her knowledge of stagecraft to help Florence's brother, Ralph, improve the delivery of his political speeches).⁸⁰ Ciocia develops this idea that Nancy's character development is a 'theatrical apprenticeship', rather than a 'sentimental education', by considering Waters' subsequent novel *Affinity* as an example of the female gothic.⁸¹ In outlining the differences between the female and the male gothic – the former is concerned

⁷⁹ Stefania Ciocia, "'Journeying against the current': a carnivalesque theatrical apprenticeship in Sarah Waters' *Tipping the Velvet*", *Literary London: Interdisciplinary Studies in the Representation of London*, 3:1 (2005) <<http://www.literarylondon.org/london-journal/march2005/Ciocia.html>> [Accessed 21st July 2014].

⁸⁰ Ciocia, 'Journeying against the current'.

⁸¹ Stefania Ciocia, 'Queer and Verdant: The Textual Politics of Sarah Waters' Neo-Victorian Novels', *Literary London: Interdisciplinary Studies in the Representation of London*, 5:2 (2007) <<http://www.literarylondon.org/london-journal/september2007/ciocia.html>> [Accessed 21st July 2014].

with critiquing the mechanisms that subjugate women, the latter with the idea of a darker, repressed self – Ciocia shows how the novel synthesises elements of both, destabilising the boundaries between proper and improper models of femininity in the process.⁸² Ciocia's work is of further significance here for its calling into question of Marie-Luise Kohlke's model of 'a new (meta)realism', arguing that Waters' 'use of historical fiction is much more than an appeal' to these conventions, and is instead '[an] intentional recuperation of popular and, more crucially, highly formulaic subgenres of the Victorian novel.'⁸³ There are parallels, Ciocia contends, between *Tipping the Velvet* and *Affinity* in terms of female identity: in Waters' first novel the city becomes a rehearsal space in which Nancy can 'try out' versions of her identity; in her second, the prison is also a kind of performance space, in that 'the only invisible person in the novel, Ruth Vigers' is the true director of Selina's 'performances' of spirituality.⁸⁴ Thus Waters undermines the notion that lesbian fiction has an obligation to provide positive lesbian role models for readers; her work should therefore be read as 'queer and verdant' in its gender and sexual politics, rather than 'queer and militant'.⁸⁵

A number of responses to *Tipping the Velvet* cite Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble* (1990) as a key influence on the novel's representations of gender, and, in particular, on the differences between Nancy's and Kitty's cross dressing. According to Butler's influential theory of gender performativity, gender is produced by iterative practices, rather than the other way round; gender is something we do, rather than something we are.⁸⁶ Jeremiah considers the elements of both performance and performativity in Waters' characterisation of Nancy, citing Butler's contention that 'in imitating gender, drag implicitly reveals the imitative structure of gender

⁸² Ciocia, 'Queer and Verdant'.

⁸³ Ciocia, 'Queer and Verdant'.

⁸⁴ Ciocia, 'Queer and Verdant'.

⁸⁵ Ciocia, 'Queer and Verdant'.

⁸⁶ Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2008), p. 185.

itself – as well as its contingency’, and that this performance gives rise to ‘pleasure’ and ‘giddiness’.⁸⁷ When Nancy dresses as a boy for the first time to join Kitty’s ‘masher’ act, what Butler calls the ‘radical contingency’ of gender is ‘not exposed – she simply looks like a boy.’⁸⁸ Thus Waters implies that Nancy’s cross-dressing is not, in Butler’s terms, a parody of an original that does not exist, but rather something closer to the true expression of her gender and sexual identity. Cheryl Wilson identifies a strand of literary DNA in the novel that stretches back to Victorian women novelists like Anne Brontë and George Eliot, with whom Waters shares an interest in the relationship between ‘the performance of music and the construction of femininity.’⁸⁹ Wilson argues that while the performance of music was considered a suitable ‘domestic accomplishment’ for women in the nineteenth century, the Victorian music hall ‘bore a vexed relationship to ideas and ideals of women’s music’, transforming something ‘ostensibly designed to attract a husband [...] into a titillating spectacle and means of employment.’⁹⁰ In setting the love affair between Nancy and Kitty against the backdrop of the Victorian music hall, Waters thus ‘[opens] up additional space for inquiries concerning gender roles, class, and sexuality’.⁹¹ Like Stefania Ciocia, Wilson underlines the connection between Nancy’s education as a theatrical performer and her sexual awakening as Kitty’s lover; like Emily Jeremiah, she also draws briefly on Butler’s work to show how ‘Nan learns that gender and sexuality are constructions that can – and sometimes must – be performed.’⁹² In particular, Nancy’s ‘performances’ as a renter are just as scripted and choreographed as her performances on the music hall stage, so that she becomes ‘the literal embodiment of sexuality and performance’.⁹³

⁸⁷ Butler, *Gender Trouble*, p. 187.

⁸⁸ Emily Jeremiah, ‘The ‘I’ inside ‘her’: Queer Narration in Sarah Waters’ *Tipping the Velvet* and Wesley Stace’s *Misfortune*’, *Women: A Cultural Review* 18 (2007), p. 137.

⁸⁹ Cheryl Wilson, ‘From the Drawing Room to the Stage: Performing Sexuality in Sarah Waters’ *Tipping the Velvet*’, *Women’s Studies* 35 (2008), p. 286.

⁹⁰ Wilson, ‘From the Drawing Room to the Stage’, p. 285.

⁹¹ Wilson, ‘From the Drawing Room to the Stage’, p. 286.

⁹² Wilson, ‘From the Drawing Room to the Stage’, p. 296.

⁹³ Wilson, ‘From the Drawing Room to the Stage’, p. 299.

Mandy Koolen's article on *Tipping the Velvet* goes beyond this argument that Judith Butler's theory of performance and performativity is an influence on the novel. Koolen implies that Waters' engagement with Butler's work is altogether more rigorous and reflexive, maintaining that '[by] detailing how Nan's onstage cross-dressings have influenced her subjectivity and gender expression, *Tipping the Velvet* shows that performances may have performative effects.'⁹⁴ In explaining what she means by this, Koolen does what Jeremiah and Wilson do not, and grapples with the confusion around and conflation of performativity in responses to *Gender Trouble* that Butler herself has had to address. Koolen cites Sara Salih's clarification of Butler's clarification, which is perhaps the most workable explanation that we have: 'whereas performance presupposes a pre-existing subject, performativity contests the very notion of the subject' producing the idea of 'a natural sort of being.'⁹⁵ As we have seen, Butler is clear that drag is an imitation, a parody, of an original that does not exist. This is performance, as, in Salih's terms, it 'presupposes a pre-existing subject'.⁹⁶ Here, Koolen's take on drag in *Tipping the Velvet* differs from those of Jeremiah and Wilson:

While differentiations between performativity and performance trouble the notion that gender can be created and changed at will, *Tipping the Velvet* and other drag narratives indicate that drag may indeed be a performative act. Drag performances involve a repetitious 'doing' of gender in that they are often rehearsed and performed multiple

⁹⁴ Mandy Koolen, 'Historical Fiction and the Revaluing of Historical Continuity in Sarah Waters' *Tipping the Velvet*, *Contemporary Literature* 51 (2010), p. 393.

⁹⁵ Sara Salih, 'On Judith Butler and Performativity' in *Sexualities and Communications in Everyday Life: A Reader*, ed. by Karen E Lovaas and Mercilee M Jenkins (London: Sage, 2007), p. 57, cited in Koolen, 'Historical Fiction', p. 393.

⁹⁶ Salih, 'On Judith Butler', p. 57, cited in Koolen, 'Historical Fiction', p. 393.

times; they consist of a repetition of acts that may, in turn, affect the performer's gender expression and overall subjectivity.⁹⁷

On one level, Koolen asserts quite clearly here that there the novel makes a link between performance and performativity. This in itself is not the issue: Butler's clarification of the differences between the terms is not a denial of the ways in which they are connected, rather a response to their conflation and confusion in responses to her theory. The problem here is that drag depends on a conscious, rather than unconscious, set of iterative practices. It assumes there is a subject behind it, so it cannot therefore be performative – even if it does have an effect on gender identity. We might say then that *Tipping the Velvet* comments on the importance of drag in the construction of gender and sexual identity, but does not necessarily imply that drag is a performative act.

Feminist and queer responses to Waters' fiction

Louisa Yates argues that the critical focus on the playfulness of Waters' approach to the historical novel means that the feminist politics of her work are often overlooked.⁹⁸ Yates' argument that there are parallels between Waters' fiction and contemporary feminist activist movements such as SlutWalk is a singularly original one; while other responses make the case for Waters' feminist agenda, no other scholar makes such a direct connection between Waters' support for the Fawcett Society and her imagining of 'the stories of marginalised identities.'⁹⁹ In an early response to *Tipping the Velvet*, Sonya Andermahr argues that recent feminist historical fiction responds to the early twenty-first century backlash against feminism by

⁹⁷ Koolen, 'Historical Fiction', p. 394.

⁹⁸ Yates, 'My Dress is Not a Yes', pp. 174-5.

⁹⁹ Yates, 'My Dress is Not a Yes', p. 175.

recreating the utopian vision of the second wave, '[undertaking] a kind of historical utopian dreaming in narratives woven around the past'.¹⁰⁰ Among other feminist responses to Waters' fiction, Nadine Müller's work on matrilineal narratives in *Fingersmith* is a key critical text for the third chapter of this thesis. Müller is particularly interested in the role Mrs Sucksby plays as the chief architect of the exchange plot in which Sue is duped into believing she is going to deceive Maud out of her fortune, only to find that it is she herself who has been double-crossed. In other words, patriarchal power – here, the deception of two young women – is exerted by a woman.¹⁰¹ In this way, Müller implies that patriarchal systems of exchange make women the agents of their own and each other's subjugation. Müller understands the complex machinations of *Fingersmith*'s plot in both terms of its fictional matrilineal narratives (which function both as a metaphor for the relationship between second- and third-wave feminisms), and as a metafictional device that comments on neo-Victorian fiction's relationship with the past.¹⁰² By yoking these two concepts together, Müller complicates the notion that fracture and discontinuity – both of which characterise the relationship between different feminisms, and between historical fiction and the past it represents – are the exclusive preserve of queer theory. By doing so, she does much to counter the accusations of fixity and essentialism that are sometimes levelled at feminist theory and politics.

Among responses to Waters' work that adopt a queer theoretical perspective, Rachel Carroll shares Nadine Müller's interest in the fractured, discontinuous relationship between past and present. In this sense, Carroll's work on *Affinity* as an example of historiography shares some

¹⁰⁰ Sonya Andermahr, 'Utopian Dreaming in Feminist Historical Fiction: Sarah Waters' *Tipping the Velvet*' in *Millennial Visions: Feminisms into the 21st Century*, ed. by Carolyn Brina, Carolyn Britton and Alison Assiter (Cardiff: Cardiff International Press, 2001), p. 138.

¹⁰¹ Nadine Müller, 'Not My Mother's Daughter: Matrilinealism, Third-Wave Feminism and Neo-Victorian Fiction', *Neo-Victorian Studies* 2 (2009 – 2010), p. 119. Jenni Millbank also comments on this notion of 'female complicity in patriarchal power structures' in relation to *Affinity*. See Jenni Millbank, 'It's about this: Lesbians, Prisons, Desire', *Social and Legal Studies* 13 (2004), p. 175.

¹⁰² Müller, 'Not My Mother's Daughter', p. 119.

theoretical territory with Waters' own co-authored academic work. As we have seen, Doan and Waters have written about the project of retrospection that is necessary in the construction of a gay identity, and how this is particularly difficult for gay women, for whom – unlike gay men – the road back to the past is shrouded in darkness. Carroll '[suggests] the ways in which a non-generational history might allow for an encounter with the past other than as origin or legacy.'¹⁰³ *Affinity* offers a way of doing this, Carroll argues, through a narrative structure in which the revelation of a secret (namely, the unmasking of Margaret's maid Ruth Vigers as Selina's male spirit-guide Peter Quick) 'generates a retrospective knowledge' that changes our understanding of the whole novel.¹⁰⁴ Furthermore, the novel's representation of spiritualism 'as a performative space', one in which non-normative sexual desire finds its expression, calls normative sexuality and sexual identity into question and thus permits a rethinking of 'the origins of modern sexual desire.'¹⁰⁵ The contrasting perspectives of Müller and Carroll thus highlight the point of tension between queer and feminist perspectives around this idea of continuity and rupture. Mandy Koolen addresses this in her article on *Tipping the Velvet*, in which she argues that

queer historical fiction may not only aid theoretical revaluings of studies of historical continuities, but also destabilise the idea that studies of differences across time must exist in tension and opposition to each other.¹⁰⁶

In this way, Koolen argues, there does not have to be a theoretical tension between essentialist perspectives on lesbian and gay history (which 'search for similitude in the past') and social

¹⁰³ Rachel Carroll, 'Rethinking Generational History: Queer Histories of Sexuality in Neo-Victorian Fiction', *Studies in the Literary Imagination* 39 (2006), p. 135.

¹⁰⁴ Carroll, 'Rethinking Generational History', p. 136.

¹⁰⁵ Carroll, 'Rethinking Generational History', p. 136.

¹⁰⁶ Koolen, 'Historical Fiction', p. 371.

constructivist perspectives (which search for ‘differences between past and present same-sex desires’).¹⁰⁷ Claire O’Callaghan is critical of the BBC adaptation of the novel for its failure to make a link between Victorian music hall ‘masher’ acts and drag king performances, their modern equivalent, but both Koolen and Jeanette King argue that the novel itself *does* encourage readers to make this connection – but in a way that is not wholly celebratory.¹⁰⁸ Writing about a scene in the novel in which Kitty and Nancy are heckled by a drunken male audience member who calls them ‘toms’, Jeanette King observes that ‘[the heckler’s] intervention’ highlights how male impersonation ‘makes possible the more illicit pleasure of the female gaze.’¹⁰⁹ Similarly, Koolen argues that the episode ‘troubles the potentially dangerous myth that queer communities necessarily provide safe spaces for the expression of cross-gender identification’, calling into question ‘[the] tendency to idealise Nan’s relationship with Flo’ in the work of Cheryl Wilson and Emily Jeremiah.¹¹⁰

Ideas about reading and writing in Waters’ fiction have also been the subject of considerable critical attention. All three of her neo-Victorian novels are to some degree concerned with the textuality of history – archives, diaries, journals – and its repressive or emancipatory potential. Scholarly interest in this area has focused, perhaps inevitably, on *Fingersmith*, a novel in which acts of reading and writing are ideologically charged.¹¹¹ It is necessary at this point to make clear – in a simplification of the novel’s dense and convoluted plot – that the narrative is told twice, from the different perspectives of Sue and Maud; it is only at the end of Sue’s narrative, a third of the way through the novel, that we understand that a spectacular act of deception and

¹⁰⁷ Koolen, ‘Historical Fiction’, p. 373.

¹⁰⁸ O’Callaghan, *Gender and Sexual Politics*, p. 189.

¹⁰⁹ Jeanette King, *The Victorian Woman Question in Contemporary Feminist Fiction* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), p. 147.

¹¹⁰ Koolen, ‘Historical Fiction’, p. 380.

¹¹¹ Kathleen Miller, ‘Sarah Waters’ *Fingersmith*: Leaving Women’s Fingerprints on Victorian Pornography’, *Nineteenth-Century Gender Studies* 4 (2008) <<http://www.ncgsjournal.com/issue41/miller.htm>> [accessed 9th August 2014].

duplicity has been enacted not just on Sue, but on the reader as well. Neither sees the twist coming. Sarah Gamble argues that a secure perspective on the novel's events is only possible through this act of re-reading, and that the two different narrations of the same events thereby function as a metaphor for the necessary double reading of the novel.¹¹² This is, Gamble says, part of *Fingersmith*'s particularly sophisticated use of the Gothic trope of doubling: the motifs of gloves and hands symbolise the way in which the two halves of the double, like the two narrators and the two versions of the novel's plot, can never perfectly mirror each other.¹¹³

Mark Llewellyn argues that Waters' defining characteristic as a writer of historical fiction is the way she signals that her novels are 'not only acts of writing but also responses to and results of acts of reading.'¹¹⁴ This begins with *Tipping the Velvet*, in which Nancy is a character whose 'gradual emergence as a subject with political knowledge is centred round literary works,' so that her reading of socialist material in the novel's final third prompts her to realise the inadequacy of the literary education she received through Diana's pornographic texts in the middle section.¹¹⁵ Llewellyn argues that this signals Waters' engagement with 'the revisionist's need to question the authenticity of accounts, narratives, histories as they are revealed to her.'¹¹⁶ In *Affinity*, 'the one voice we never hear' is 'that of the maidservant Ruth Vigers', the architect of the plot to dupe Margaret and release Selina from prison; in this way, argues Llewellyn, the novel 'enacts its own historical silencing upon us': we are made to 'collude in our own deception.'¹¹⁷ Of particular relevance to the first chapter of this thesis is Kathleen Miller's work on reading in *Fingersmith*, in which she argues that 'the production,

¹¹² Sarah Gamble, "'I know everything. I know nothing': (Re)Reading *Fingersmith*'s Deceptive Doubles' in *Contemporary Critical Perspectives*, ed. by Mitchell, p. 42.

¹¹³ Gamble, 'I know everything', p. 48.

¹¹⁴ Mark Llewellyn, 'Breaking the Mould? Sarah Waters and the Politics of Genre' in *Metafiction and Metahistory in Contemporary Women's Writing*, ed. by Ann Heilmann and Mark Llewellyn (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), p. 196.

¹¹⁵ Llewellyn, 'Breaking the Mould', p. 197.

¹¹⁶ Llewellyn, 'Breaking the Mould', p. 198.

¹¹⁷ Llewellyn, 'Breaking the Mould', p. 199.

consumption and transmission of texts assumes a highly ideologically charged relationship to the reading experience’, so that acts of reading, writing and collecting texts become fraught with risk and danger.¹¹⁸ There are parallels here with Nadine Müller’s work on the novel, in that Miller considers the text’s engagement with female modes of production – childbirth, writing – and their connection with ideas about female inheritance, particularly in terms of the inheritance of a culture that objectifies women’s bodies; Miller also argues, as I do in my chapter on *Fingersmith*, that the novel examines the relationship between the female human body and the body of the book.¹¹⁹ For Müller, this is about writing as well as reading: the motif of ink suggests ‘a female appropriation, rather than obliteration, of pornography’; ink may be associated with Christopher Lilly’s abuse of Maud for most of the novel, but it becomes associated with Maud’s desire for Sue when she begins to feel that she is ‘running...like ink’ (p. 282).¹²⁰

As we have seen, Waters’ own academic work is concerned with the difficulty of tracing the historical origins of a lesbian identity. Paulina Palmer’s work on lesbian reading and writing practices in Waters’ fiction makes a similar point, in that she argues that the categories of ‘lesbian writer’ and ‘lesbian reader’ have only recently come into existence; their ‘historical origins are difficult, if not impossible’ to locate, and they have only been brought into being by the efforts of lesbian writers such as Waters and the demands from a lesbian readership for fiction that in some way reflects their interests and identities.¹²¹ The influence of 19th-century male canonical writers on *Fingersmith* is one of the ways in which Waters juxtaposes mainstream and marginalised literary cultures in order to retrieve and recuperate lesbian and

¹¹⁸ Miller, ‘Leaving Women’s Fingerprints’.

¹¹⁹ Miller, ‘Leaving Women’s Fingerprints’.

¹²⁰ Nadine Müller, ‘Sexual F(r)ictions: Pornography in Neo-Victorian Women’s Fiction’ in *The Female Figure in Contemporary Historical Fiction*, ed. by Emma Short (London, Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), p. 120.

¹²¹ Paulina Palmer, “‘She began to show me the words she had written, one by one’: Lesbian Reading and Writing Practices in the Fiction of Sarah Waters’, *Women: A Cultural Review*, 19 (2008), p. 70.

gay history.¹²² Like other scholars, Palmer identifies a class dimension in Waters' handling of the politics of reading and writing practices: in *Tipping the Velvet*, the wealthy, upper-class Diana contributes to a suffrage magazine that she prevents the working-class Nancy from reading; in contrast, Florence introduces Nancy to the writings of Eleanor Marx in a way that avoids any elitism and underlines their shared social class position.¹²³

Methodology: The palimpsest

How, then, can we conceptualise Waters' complex engagement with and approach to the past? I suggest that the palimpsest, long established as a literary, historical and cultural metaphor and open to reinvigoration and reinscription, is a suitable methodological tool.¹²⁴ The term 'palimpsest' has its origins in classical antiquity. As I explained briefly at the beginning of the introduction, it refers, in a literal sense, to a manuscript whose original inscription has been erased so that the vellum can be reinscribed; over time, chemical reactions between ink and air make the original inscription visible beneath the superimposition.¹²⁵ Until 1845, palimpsests were, as Sarah Dillon points out, 'palaeographic oddities of concern only to those researching and publishing ancient manuscripts.'¹²⁶ The publication of Thomas De Quincey's essay 'The Palimpsest of the Human Brain' in this year inaugurated the palimpsest – with the definite article – as a literary, cultural and historical concept, 'a strange, new figurative entity' related to but distinct from palaeographic palimpsests.¹²⁷ David Platten argues that the palimpsest is 'sensual', with its 'material density' and 'chemical magic' facilitating an 'excavation of the

¹²² Palmer, 'She began to show me the words', p. 70.

¹²³ Palmer, 'She began to show me the words', p. 74.

¹²⁴ Sarah Dillon, 'Reinscribing De Quincey's Palimpsest: The significance of the palimpsest in contemporary literary and cultural studies', *Textual Practice* 19 (2007), p. 243.

¹²⁵ Dillon, 'Reinscribing De Quincey's Palimpsest', p. 243.

¹²⁶ Sarah Dillon, *The Palimpsest: Literature, Criticism, Theory* (London: Continuum, 2007), p. 1.

¹²⁷ Dillon, *The Palimpsest*, p. 1.

past.’¹²⁸ He observes that the palimpsest’s use as ‘a metaphor for master learning and scholarship’ works to ‘[reinforce] the notion that knowledge is compacted, as if in archaeological strata, rather than available through simple linear narratives.’¹²⁹ This is something I draw on in Chapter 2, where I argue that this model of the palimpsest reveals how women can be made complicit in the reproduction of patriarchal oppression through their reading and writing practices.¹³⁰

It is the shadowy, spectral first layer of the palimpsest that is of primary interest to scholars; this has the effect of reifying the original inscription, despite its ghostliness and illegibility, as some sort of fixed point of historical ‘truth’ from which, in a straightforward linear fashion, all other histories derive.¹³¹ Sarah Dillon’s queer theorising of the palimpsest comprehensively rejects this perspective. She uses as a starting point for her argument the feminist critical approach of Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar:

[W]omen from Jane Austen and Mary Shelley to Emily Brontë and Emily Dickinson produced literary works that are in some sense palimpsestic, works whose surface designs conceal or obscure deeper, less accessible (and less socially acceptable) levels of meaning. Thus these authors managed the difficult task of achieving true female authority by simultaneously conforming to and subverting patriarchal literary standards.¹³²

¹²⁸ David Platten, preface to *Rewriting Wrongs: French Crime Fiction and the Palimpsest*, ed. by Angela Kimyongür and Amy Wigelsworth (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2014), p. ix.

¹²⁹ Platten, preface to *Rewriting Wrongs*, p. ix.

¹³⁰ Platten, preface to *Rewriting Wrongs*, p. ix.

¹³¹ Dillon, *The Palimpsest*, p. 65.

¹³² Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000), p. 73.

Implicit in Gilbert and Gubar's theorising of the palimpsest as female and feminist is the idea of a kind of literary DNA – a line of maternal inheritance that connects writers such as Waters to their literary 'mothers'. Although this does not quite allow for the fractures and ruptures of the genealogical model of female inheritance, it nevertheless paradoxically reveals that the authority of female authorship is tenuous and unstable: the legitimacy of new female writing is not necessarily guaranteed.

Dillon argues that Gilbert and Gubar's understanding 'of the structure of the palimpsest in terms of suppression and oppression, of layering and superimposition' leads to a feminist critical approach whose objective is to 'uncover and bring to light the suppressed women's narratives concealed within these texts.'¹³³ This, insists Dillon, risks 'ignoring or disregarding the overlying texts of these narratives, as well as the complex relationality of the different texts which constitute their fabric.'¹³⁴ This produces a situation in which the first layer of the palimpsest is subject to a dual process of reification: first by the fundamental scholarly imperative to reveal the first inscription, and then by the feminist imperative to figure this first layer as a suppressed history. In turn, the subsequent layers are doubly disregarded, and even this implication that there *is* such a thing as a first layer is problematic, implying that the structure of the palimpsest is fixed, and has a clear point of origin.¹³⁵ In terms of my interest in the palimpsest as a metaphor for queer history, one of my key areas of investigation in this thesis, this is therefore not a useful or workable conceptualisation. This is not to say, however, that I follow Dillon in wholly rejecting Gilbert and Gubar's feminist critical approach: as I have discussed here, there is a clear critical consensus that Waters' novels are informed by both feminist and queer approaches to history. Therefore, just as I use 'queer' as an umbrella term

¹³³ Dillon, 'Reinscribing De Quincey's Palimpsest', p. 256.

¹³⁴ Dillon, 'Reinscribing De Quincey's Palimpsest', p. 256.

¹³⁵ Dillon, 'Reinscribing De Quincey's Palimpsest', p. 256.

to focus on current methodological debates, and ‘feminist’ or ‘lesbian’ to draw attention to Waters’ focus on particular aspects of female same-sex history, I also develop a model of the palimpsest that accommodates both feminist and queer theoretical approaches. Thus, for example, in Chapter 2, I explore the appropriation and exploitation of female reading and writing practices by a masculine, patriarchal bibliographic and pornographic tradition, while in Chapter 4, I stretch and manipulate the palimpsest metaphor to its fullest extent in order to disrupt the notion that its structure is fixed or straightforward. Given Waters’ interest in the particular aspects of female same-sex history I explore in this thesis, my project would lack methodological integrity if I were to offer a reading of the palimpsest as *only* queer, as Sarah Dillon does.

Dillon’s theorising of the palimpsest is, however, a clear influence in the sections of the thesis where I make use of queer theoretical perspectives, and I draw on, adapt and extend her arguments in relation to Gilbert and Gubar. Throughout the thesis, I follow Dillon in using ‘palimpsestic’ to mean ‘something that is, or makes, a palimpsest’, and ‘palimpsestuous’ to describe ‘the kind of relationality reified in the palimpsest. [...] Where ‘palimpsestic’ refers to the process of layering that produces a palimpsest, ‘palimpsestuous’ describes the structure that one is presented with as a result of that process, and the subsequent reappearance of the underlying script’.¹³⁶ This movement from a palimpsestic to a palimpsestuous approach is how, Dillon argues, the ‘reductionist risks’ of Gilbert and Gubar’s approach can be avoided, producing instead a model of the palimpsest as ‘a queer structure in which are intertwined multiple and varying inscriptions’, affording a ‘more radical queer palimpsestuous reading’.¹³⁷ It is clear that Dillon uses the term ‘queer’ to mean both complex and associated with non-

¹³⁶ Dillon, *The Palimpsest*, p. 3.

¹³⁷ Dillon, ‘Reinscribing De Quincey’s Palimpsest’, p. 257.

normative sexuality. Referencing Thomas De Quincey's inauguration of the palimpsest metaphor in 1854, something I draw on in Chapter 1, Dillon argues that the palimpsest has been used in a diverse range of academic disciplines because it strengthens our understanding of various ideas and concepts.¹³⁸ This then 'enable[s] a reinscription of the palimpsest that sophisticates our understanding of its complex structure and logic'.¹³⁹ In a palimpsestuous sense, a queer reading

traces in the fabric of literary and cultural palimpsests the interlocking narratives of 'masculinity' and 'femininity', 'heterosexuality' and 'homosexuality', that characterise gender and sexuality, writing and culture. As such, it provides a reading method that can adequately respond to texts [that are] complex and interwoven without reducing them to a single narrative, be it one of autobiography or homosexuality.¹⁴⁰

Dillon's argument here underscores how the palimpsest provides an ideal methodology for reading Waters' fiction: her novels are indeed 'complex and interwoven' in terms of their engagement with these 'interlocking narratives': in *Tipping the Velvet*, for example, Nancy experiments with her feminine and masculine identities at different points in the narrative, and in *The Night Watch* there is a queer imperative in Waters' blurring of the boundaries between categories of sexual and gender identity. This brings me to the most important part of Dillon's argument in relation to the way I use the palimpsest metaphor in the thesis: the phrase 'complex and interwoven' here describes the relationship between the different layers of the palimpsest, something which is largely missing from the classical palimpsest and from Gilbert and Gubar's feminist critical reading, but with which this thesis is preoccupied. Dillon asserts that the

¹³⁸ Thomas De Quincey, 'The Palimpsest of the Human Brain' (1845) http://essays.quotidiana.org/dequincey/palimpsest_of_the_human_brain/ [accessed 8th January 2015].

¹³⁹ Dillon, 'Reinscribing De Quincey's Palimpsest', p. 243.

¹⁴⁰ Dillon, 'Reinscribing De Quincey's Palimpsest', p. 257.

palimpsest ‘is an involuted phenomenon where *otherwise unrelated* texts are involved and entangled, intricately woven, interrupting and inhabiting each other’.¹⁴¹ This is what is truly described by the term ‘palimpsestuousness’. In the classical palimpsest, the layers of writing have no thematic relationship to one another, and yet their appearance within the same structure forces them into a spatial and temporal relationship. From here it is only a small methodological and conceptual stretch to reach a model of the palimpsest in which the layers *are* related thematically, theoretically and historically, as they are in my readings of Waters’ novels. This is what legitimates the kind of stretching and manipulating of the palimpsest metaphor that I do throughout the thesis. As Dillon says:

De Quincey’s concept of the palimpsest made strange and revitalised palaeographic palimpsests. In the same way, ‘palimpsestuous’ makes that concept strange, and helps to rewrite and refigure the palimpsest in the context of late-twentieth and early twenty-first century literary and cultural thought.¹⁴²

In my thesis, I revitalise and make strange the concept of the palimpsest as a literary and historical metaphor, refiguring and rewriting it in different ways in different chapters. In Chapter 3, in which I focus on texts and archives in Waters’ third novel *Fingersmith*, my definition comes closer than it does anywhere else in the thesis to the palimpsest’s origins in classical antiquity. I refer to this definition using the term ‘paper palimpsest’ because this chapter examines the novel’s engagement with how history resides in written texts, in paper and ink. The particular archive represented in *Fingersmith* is a ‘paper palimpsest’ by virtue of its being a written text that has been appended over time, in which different time periods exist

¹⁴¹ Dillon, ‘Reinscribing De Quincey’s Palimpsest’, p. 245; italics mine.

¹⁴² Dillon, ‘Reinscribing De Quincey’s Palimpsest’, p. 245.

simultaneously, and within which certain histories and stories can become lost or obscured. In Chapter 2 and Chapter 4, I stretch the definition of the palimpsest further. Here, my focus is on physical objects, domestic interiors and buildings. I consider how encounters with history happen differently through tactile encounters than they do through textual ones, but in a way that maintains an understanding of an object as a text – something that can be read, and that is sedimented with layers of history and meaning. I manipulate the palimpsest metaphor to its fullest extent in Chapter 3, where I use the term ‘liquid palimpsest’ to evaluate Waters’ representation of darkness. The term ‘darkness’ refers here to a literal lack of light in dark rooms and spaces, to hiddenness and secrecy, and to queer history’s own blind spots. As I outline below, I understand this darkness to be a metaphor for queer history itself, in that darkness is often materially described in the novels. The term ‘liquid palimpsest’ thus implies a three-dimensional space (in contrast to the two-dimensional surface of paper and objects) in which queer lives and histories can become lost or submerged – can, indeed, become saturated in this lostness or drowned within it – and are therefore more difficult to retrieve than they might be from textual or material historical records.

Summaries of chapters

In Chapter One, I introduce the idea of the ‘damaged palimpsest’, focusing on Waters’ twentieth-century-set novels – *The Night Watch*, *The Little Stranger* and *The Paying Guests*. All three are more subdued and sober than the more playful neo-Victorian novels, and all three are preoccupied, to varying degrees, with dirt, dust, clutter and general shabbiness. Drawing on key texts by Marianne Hirsch, Natasha Alden and Heather Love, I argue that these signs of domestic neglect can be linked to late twentieth- and early twenty-first century ideas about queer shame and queer postmemory. In particular, I look closely at the endless, back-breaking

housework done by Frances Wray, the protagonist, arguing that the novel does far more than merely draw the reader's attention to the nature of female domestic labour; rather, the repetitive patterns of erasure and reinscription of Frances' housework are instead a rehearsal for the *real* clearing up she must do later in the novel – of the physical evidence of the murder of Leonard, husband of the woman with whom she is having an affair, and, on a more metaphorical level, the 'clearing up' of the truth about his death through her artful and practised deflection of police questions.

In Chapter Two, I develop the model of the paper or textual palimpsest to examine Waters' third and final neo-Victorian novel *Fingersmith* in relation to the archive of pornographic texts from which Maud, one of the novel's dual first-person protagonists, is forced to read aloud. These texts are part of Henry Spencer Ashbee's three-volume bibliography of pornography, all of which are extant, and held in the British Library; this very physical and tangible textual palimpsest is, I argue, linked to the similarly repetitive, cyclical patterns of abuse and enslavement in the novel. Waters' use of this real archive is a matter of some fascination to me as a researcher; although it is referenced and commented on in a number of responses to the novel, no scholar has yet consulted the actual texts themselves in detail. This is the focus of my original research in this chapter. After reading the same volumes that Waters studied for her research on the novel, I put her quotations from them into context to see what is 'going on around' the passages that Maud reads to Christopher Lilly's visitors. Doing so reveals that these texts are much more graphically and sexually explicit and violent than the quotations from them might lead the reader to believe, which, I argue, calls into question positive readings of the novel's ending, in which Maud turns to writing pornography herself. Among other things, for example, Maud marks her defiant escape from Lilly by destroying with a razor his prized copy of a particularly disturbing text called *The Curtain Drawn Up* – but the *exact copy*

represented in the novel is in the British Library in near-perfect, unrazored condition, something which can only be discovered through reading and handling the real archive itself.

As I set out earlier in the introduction, Waters' shift in setting from the Victorian period to the mid-twentieth century is accompanied by a shift in her approach to history, namely from textuality to materiality. In my third chapter, I stretch the definition of the palimpsest further, looking closely at several key objects in *The Night Watch*, *The Little Stranger* and *The Paying Guests* – a ring, a pair of silk pyjamas, a plaster acorn, a stand ashtray, a small china gypsy caravan – to explore how these novels offer a different way of looking at history, one in which encounters with the past are more tactile and sensory than they might be with printed or written texts. All these objects have significance in relation to plot and character, resurfacing at different points in each novel, becoming – in a palimpsestic sense – sedimented with history and meaning as they move through space and time. I argue in this chapter that these objects become closely bound up with Waters' ideas about queer history: they are lost, displaced, and damaged; they are all, to some extent, associated with hiddenness and secrecy and concealment; some of them become marked with the signs of trauma and violence.

In my final chapter, I stretch the palimpsest to its fullest extent, considering representations of different kinds of darkness in *Tipping the Velvet*, *Affinity*, and *The Paying Guests*. Here, I use my conceptualisation of the three-dimensional 'liquid' palimpsest as a metaphor for queer history, arguing that darkness in these novels is invested with both pleasure and danger: the thrill of secrecy, and the threat of discovery. The key dark places in Waters' fiction – the scullery in which Frances and Lilian have their first sexual encounter in *The Paying Guests*, Kitty and Nancy's carriage in *Tipping the Velvet*, a hiding space created by a baffle-wall in *The Night Watch* – are all liminal spaces, in that they afford an equivocal, not absolute, privacy,

and are in this sense somewhere between public and private. In *The Paying Guests*, the scullery becomes a closet, in that Frances and Lilian can only express their illicit desire for each other in the darkness; their encounter is, in Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's terms, fraught with the risk of injury inherent in the act of coming out.¹⁴³ In *Tipping the Velvet*, darkness has magical and transformative qualities; it is the chemical agent that turns Kitty and Nancy from friends into lovers as they move from the 'in-between' dark space of their carriage to the shadows on Lambeth Bridge and watch the dark waters of the Thames freeze over below. London's great river is also a key motif in *Affinity*, in which Waters underlines the continuity between Millbank Prison and the Thames – both metaphorically and also quite literally, in that the water often seeps into the walls and interior spaces of the prison. As always in Waters' novels, darkness is alluring and seductive here, even as it becomes the means by which Selina and Ruth Vigers set into motion the machinations of their plot against Margaret. In the conclusion, I focus on adaptations of the novels on stage and screen to return to the question of Waters' position in contemporary culture. Together, then, the four chapters show how stretching and manipulating the palimpsest metaphor, particularly in the context of my original archival research, affords a new reading of Waters' historiographic approach, and of the disruptive potential of her fiction.

¹⁴³ Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008), p. 81.

Chapter 1: The damaged palimpsest: Queer shame and lesbian postmemory in *The Night Watch*, *The Little Stranger* and *The Paying Guests*

Introduction

Michael Ondaatje's celebrated World War Two novel *The English Patient* (1990) features one of the most compelling examples of the palimpsest in contemporary historical fiction. Like Christopher Lilly's bibliography of pornography in *Fingersmith* (2002), it takes the form of a book whose pages have been superimposed with photographs, cuttings, and annotations.¹ The owner and creator of this palimpsest, the Hungarian explorer and cartographer Count László de Almásy, is, like Christopher Lilly, loosely based on a real individual. In the novel's opening chapter, Almásy's plane catches fire and crashes in the North African desert. Burned beyond recognition, unable to remember who he is and what has happened to him during the war, he spends the last months of his life in a Tuscan villa in the care of Hana, a Canadian nurse. Almásy's treasured copy of Herodotus' *Histories* has survived the plane crash with him, its pages charred and scorched. Hana uses the drawings, cuttings, photographs, notes and diary entries that Almásy has added to the book to piece together the story of his adulterous affair with the wife of a friend and colleague. In this way, the novel blurs the distinction between the book and the body, not only in the sense that the burned and damaged book becomes a metaphor for Almásy's similarly scarred body, but also in the way that the physical marks of trauma on this paper record of his past come to represent the emotional and psychological damage wrought by betrayal, infidelity and violence. Ondaatje uses the palimpsest metaphor to comment on how the recording of history is a fractured, fragmented process, in which the sedimenting of layers of meaning occludes and obscures records of lives and experiences,

¹ Sarah Waters, *Fingersmith* (London: Virago, 2003).

making their retrieval difficult. In a similar way, I begin my reading of the novels with an evaluation of the obsessively rigorous housework done by the novel's protagonist, Frances Wray, arguing that the constantly returning dust and dirt can be understood in terms of Sally Munt's notion that queer shame has been repressed within gay rights discourses.² This leads into a discussion of the decaying country house in *The Little Stranger* (2009), and then the recurring presence of dust, ash and domestic detritus in *The Night Watch* (2006).³

Waters' fourth novel *The Night Watch*, set in London during and just after World War Two, is distinguished by its unusual time structure. Each of the novel's three sections moves forwards in a temporal sense, but they appear in reverse order. Thus the novel opens in 1947, 'plung[es] back into the trauma and excitement of the war itself' and the 'Little Blitz' of 1944, then concludes in 1941.⁴ This means that we encounter the characters' various situations and relationships in 1947, and then learn *afterwards* how they got there, so that the entire novel is 'a series of slowly uncovered secrets.'⁵ The narrative threads together the stories of four main characters – Kay, Viv, Helen and Duncan – who have been damaged in different ways by their personal experiences of the war. Kay, arguably the principal character in what is essentially an ensemble novel, is restless and solitary in the novel's opening section, spending her days walking London's bomb-damaged streets, her life bereft of purpose now that she is no longer a wartime ambulance driver. Viv and Helen work together in a dating agency, and Duncan, Viv's younger brother, has just been released from prison; Helen is in an unhappy relationship with Julia, a writer of detective fiction. As the narrative moves back to 1944 and then to 1941, we learn that Viv had an affair with Reggie, a soldier and married man, that resulted in an

² Sally Munt, *Queer Attachments: The Cultural Politics of Shame* (Aldershot: Ashgate Publishing, 2008), p. 94.

³ Sarah Waters, *The Little Stranger* (London: Virago, 2009); *The Night Watch* (London: Virago, 2011).

⁴ Sarah Waters, 'Romance among the ruins', *The Guardian*, 28th January 2006.

<<http://www.theguardian.com/books/2006/jan/28/fiction.sarahwaters>> [accessed 6th May 2016].

⁵ Justine Jordan, 'Through the bomb sites, backwards', *The Guardian*, 4th February 2006

<<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2006/feb/04/fiction.sarahwaters>> [accessed 6th May 2016].

unplanned pregnancy and a gruesome backstreet abortion; that Helen left Kay for Julia; that Duncan was imprisoned during the war for his complicity in his friend Alec's suicide. The novel ends – or begins – in 1941, with the revelation that Kay met Helen when she rescued her from a bombed building. In this way, *The Night Watch* calls into question the very notion of a future: we reach the 'end' of the story and understand that it is not an ending at all, because the characters' futures are, in terms of our reading, in the past.⁶

In this chapter, I develop the notion of the 'damaged palimpsest'. Drawing on the work of Sally Munt and Heather Love on queer shame, I argue that recurring images of scarring, illness and injury in Waters' more recent works are symbolic of the trauma and suffering experienced by queer subjects in the past and present. The refusal of any kind of 'gay pride' discourse in Waters' twentieth-century-set novels ties in with an idea central to current theoretical debates around queer shame: that gay pride has suppressed queer shame within the late twentieth and early twenty-first century context of the mainstreaming and normalisation of queer culture and identities.⁷ Sally Munt argues that '[t]he presence of shame has been repressed in the discourse of homosexual rights in an unhelpful way', and, in the language of reflection and introspection, insists that 'we must learn to revisit its ambivalent effects.'⁸ Examples of the damaged palimpsest in Waters' fiction are perhaps not as obvious as Almásy's Herodotus, but Ondaatje's novel nevertheless offers a way into thinking about and conceptualising what the idea of this 'damaged palimpsest' might mean. Several responses to *The Night Watch*, *The Little Stranger* and *The Paying Guests* (2014) acknowledge that these novels are, in some way, less playful than her works of neo-Victorian fiction.⁹ Georges Letissier, for example, says of *The Little*

⁶ Kaye Mitchell, "'What does it feel like to be an anachronism?': Time in *The Night Watch*" in *Sarah Waters: Contemporary Critical Perspectives*, ed. by Kaye Mitchell (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), p. 92.

⁷ Heather Love, *Feeling Backward: Loss and the Politics of Queer History* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007), p. 30.

⁸ Sally Munt, *Queer Attachments: The Cultural Politics of Shame* (Aldershot: Ashgate Publishing, 2008), p. 95.

⁹ Sarah Waters, *The Paying Guests* (London: Virago, 2014).

Stranger that ‘Faraday, who is a lacklustre, no-nonsense heterosexual bachelor, has none of the flamboyance’ of Nancy and Kitty in *Tipping the Velvet* (1998) or Sue and Maud in *Fingersmith*.¹⁰ Similarly, Natasha Alden observes that Waters has ‘gone to some trouble to create the tone of 1940s fiction’ in *The Night Watch*, producing something more sombre and detached than the brighter and more playful first-person narrative voices of her earlier work.¹¹ This is partly achieved through their post-war settings, which have all the attendant unease, anxiety and pessimism that characterised the early 1920s and late 1940s. These novels are also, crucially, set during a period when the existence of sexual relationships between women had been acknowledged beyond the sphere of sexology and could therefore be policed and regulated, culturally and socially if not legally: in *The Night Watch*, for example, Kay’s masculine clothing is socially acceptable during the war when she is working as an ambulance driver, but renders her highly visible after the war has ended.¹² As Natasha Alden argues, the ‘more conventional’ Julia and Helen go to some trouble to conceal the truth of their relationship from their neighbours, even though it is apparent that the neighbours have worked it out for themselves.¹³

Claire O’Callaghan makes the connection between the twentieth-century post-war context and Waters’ narrative concern with ‘nostalgia, regret, shame, despair, resentment, passivity, escapism, self-hatred, withdrawal, bitterness, defeatism and loneliness’.¹⁴ Similarly, Rachel

¹⁰ Sarah Waters, *Tipping the Velvet* (London: Virago, 2002); Georges Letissier, ‘Hauntology as Compromise between Traumatic Realism and Spooky Romance in Sarah Waters’ *The Little Stranger*’ in *Trauma and Romance in Contemporary British Literature*, ed. by Jean-Michel Ganteau and Susana Onega (Abingdon: Routledge, 2013), p. 37.

¹¹ Natasha Alden, “‘Possibility, Pleasure and Peril’: *The Night Watch* as a Very Literary History’ in *Sarah Waters: Contemporary Critical Perspectives*, ed. by Kaye Mitchell (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), p. 73.

¹² Parliament debated a Bill criminalising sexual relationships between women in 1920, but rejected it on the grounds that such legislation ‘would only draw attention to the offence’. (Rebecca Jennings, *A Lesbian History of Britain: Love and Sex between Women Since 1500* (Oxford: Greenwood World Publishing, 2007), p. 13).

¹³ Natasha Alden, *Reading Behind the Lines: Postmemory in Contemporary British War Fiction* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2014), p. 184.

¹⁴ Claire O’Callaghan, *Sarah Waters: Gender and Sexual Politics* (London: Bloomsbury, 2017), p. 108.

Wood argues that feelings of shame in *The Night Watch* are not confined to gay relationships: while Helen envies the freedom heterosexual characters have to express their love publicly, this perception ‘is challenged by the narrative of Viv’ whose affair with a married man requires just as much secrecy and subterfuge as the relationship between Helen and Julia.¹⁵ Waters herself has pointed out that Reggie and Viv are ‘instantly recognisable as a couple in a way Helen and Julia aren’t’, and that ‘everybody’s got to be secret for different reasons.’¹⁶ None of this is to say that Waters engages with these ideas about queer shame merely to imply that lesbian relationships in the 1920s or the 1940s – or, indeed, the twenty-first century – are invariably associated with feelings of shame, self-hatred or loneliness, although her intervention here is, as I will discuss later, complex. Rather, as Natasha Alden argues, Waters both draws on and subverts gay and lesbian novels of the mid-twentieth-century, such as Mary Renault’s *The Charioteer* (1953) and Han Suyin’s *Winter Love* (1962), in which ‘crippling self-hatred and fear [...] seems to be a universal condition’ and ‘the options on offer in fiction of the time’ are to ‘[end] up dead, alone, or married to a man.’¹⁷

Domestic settings are associated with neglect and decay in all three of Waters’ twentieth-century-set novels. This is chiefly expressed through a preoccupation with dust, ash, dirt, clutter, and general untidiness. Jessica Gildersleeve makes this observation in relation to *The Night Watch*, whose ‘female characters [are] figured in terms of, and recurrently associated with, ash [and] dust.’¹⁸ She argues that ‘the politicised critique of the destruction of women’s relationships [in *The Night Watch* and *The Little Stranger*] recalls the figuration of Irigaray’s

¹⁵ Rachel Wood, ‘Walking and Watching’ in *Queer London: Sarah Waters’ Tipping the Velvet and The Night Watch*, *Journal of Lesbian Studies* 17 (2013), p. 313.

¹⁶ Lucie Armitt, interview with Sarah Waters (CWWN Conference, University of Wales, Bangor, 22nd April 2006), *Feminist Review* 85 (2007), p. 122.

¹⁷ Alden, *Reading Behind the Lines*, p. 185.

¹⁸ Jessica Gildersleeve, ‘Anxious Affinities: Gender and *Déréliction* in Sarah Waters’ Neo-Forties Novels’ in *Sarah Waters and Contemporary Feminisms*, ed. by Adele Jones and Claire O’Callaghan (London: Palgrave MacMillan, 2016), p. 87.

concept of *déréliction*', according to which 'women do not have agency or subjectivity, since female identity is subsumed by the expectation of maternity.'¹⁹ This particularly describes the condition of gay or queer women, who are 'always already contained within, but made ontologically homeless by, the patriarchal symbolic order.'²⁰ In *The Night Watch*, bomb damage to exterior structures is accompanied by domestic neglect, so that the 'stucco façade' of a terraced house has become sedimented over time with 'fogs' and 'soot', and 'more recently [with] brick dust' (p. 51), and Julia's flat is untidy and chaotic: 'There was [...] a dirty pink velvet chair, with springs and strips of torn hessian showing through underneath' and 'a mantelpiece [with] an ashtray on it, overflowing with stubs' (p. 347). Throughout the 1947 section of the novel in particular, there are repeated references to dust: as she walks through 'well-swept, devastated streets', Kay thinks she can 'feel dust, settling already on her lips, her lashes, in the corners of her eyes' (p. 6); a bowl of walnuts the Christian Scientist Mr Leonard keeps in his office always have 'a layer of dust upon them, woolly, undisturbed' (p. 8). Elsewhere in the novel, this sense of neglect is associated with the traces of themselves that people leave behind. Viv, who spends the war living in a women's boarding house, observes that 'if you looked closely at the floor [...] you could see it was full of hairs', and declares that she is 'absolutely sick to death' of the 'powder', 'scent' and 'lipstick marks' that reveal 'the closeness of so many girls' (p. 248). The domestic settings of the novel are inscribed with the histories of those who have occupied them, but in a way that is frequently associated with damage, neglect and decay of different kinds.

As Jessica Gildersleeve and Nike Sulway argue, 'tidying up, putting things in order and in their proper place, is a recurring motif in Waters' novels.'²¹ This motif reaches its apotheosis in

¹⁹ Gildersleeve, 'Anxious Affinities', p. 83.

²⁰ Gildersleeve, 'Anxious Affinities', p. 84.

²¹ Jessica Gildersleeve and Nike Sulway, 'The Violent Pacifist: Ethics and Disorder in Sarah Waters' *The Paying Guests*', *English* 68 (2019), p. 67.

Waters' most recent novel *The Paying Guests*, set in Camberwell in 1922. There is an obvious parallel here with the post-war settings of *The Night Watch* and *The Little Stranger*: London in the early twenties is represented as a tired and worn-out city caught between the qualified celebration of the Armistice and the 'Roaring Twenties' generation that would come a few years later. Frances Wray, a washed-out spinster at the age of twenty-five, seems, like Kay, to be just one of many women who are 'left over' at the end of the war: both her brothers and her father are dead, and she still lives with her mother, a woman whose attitudes towards gender and sexual politics are a relic of the Victorian era. The Wrays are upper-middle-class, but find that their 'class privilege has been erased by the war's consequences'.²² They cannot afford domestic help, so the responsibility for cleaning the house falls on Frances, who has to suffer the indignity of her neighbours being aghast at the sight of 'a well-bred woman doing the work of a char' (p. 27). The Wrays' straitened financial circumstances also oblige them to take in Lilian and Leonard Barber, the euphemistically-named 'paying guests' of the title. The Barbers are members of the new white-collar 'clerk class' – brash, tasteless, emboldened by their legitimacy in the post-war social order. The initial awkwardness between Frances and Lilian eventually gives way, and, forced into close proximity with one another, they fall in love. Their affair – made risky, thrilling and dangerous by the ever-present threat of discovery – consists of snatched moments in confined domestic spaces: corridors, landings, locked bedrooms, the scullery. When Leonard Barber makes the simultaneous discovery of Lilian's self-induced abortion and her affair with Frances, the ensuing physical confrontation culminates in Lilian fatally injuring him with the only suitable weapon to hand – a stand-ashtray. At this point, the novel takes a dramatic formal twist from simmering romance to murder investigation, as Frances cleans up the evidence of the murder in the same way she has spent the first half of the novel cleaning the house.

²² Gildersleeve and Sulway, 'The Violent Pacifist', p. 68.

Unless this link between Frances' housework and Leonard's murder is apprehended, it can be difficult to rationalise the amount of time Waters devotes to descriptions of Frances' household chores. As Jessica Gildersleeve and Nike Sulway observe:

Having the Barbers in the house makes public and explicit the reduced circumstances of Frances and her mother. It increases the amount of domestic labour that Frances must undertake – labour that Frances' mother and her peers consider beneath her. The presence of the Barbers in the house also reduces the privacy that Frances and her mother have enjoyed, and brings them into close and intimate contact with people, objects, and behaviours that disrupt their already-disrupted household.²³

The 'amount of domestic labour Frances must undertake' is considerable. There are 'picture rails and plasterwork and elaborate skirting boards that [have] to be dusted almost daily' (p. 24). The dust is a recurring image here as it is in *The Night Watch*, but in the later novel it is a constant menace to be kept at bay: 'endless dusting, it felt like. Where on earth did the dust come from? [...] She could beat and beat a rug or cushion, and still it would come' (p. 24-5). At its most extreme and physically strenuous, Frances' housework involves raking ashes out of the stove (p. 23), polishing the Regency floorboards until they shine 'like dark toffee', (p. 8), scrubbing lavatory pans (p. 47), polishing tiles with vinegar (p. 25), and, when the hot weather comes, dealing with sour milk and 'ants invad[ing] the larder' (p. 244). Waters is careful to show that the results of Frances' work last for so little time that she has to begin again almost as soon as she has finished. When Lilian first arrives, she walks across the polished floorboards and leaves 'damp prints in the wax' (p. 8); the heavy Victorian furniture

²³ Gildersleeve and Sulway, 'The Violent Pacifist', p. 80.

must be dusted ‘several times a week’ (p. 24); Frances feels sure that the house ‘must produce [dust] as flesh oozes sweat’ (p. 25). In writing about the early stages of the novel, Gildersleeve and Sulway argue that ‘Just as the gloss on the slate tiles she scrubs each day fades, so too is Frances more spectral than the dead men, her brothers and father, who haunt her quiet life with her mother.’²⁴

There are several ways of reading Frances’ housework. At one level, the reader familiar with Waters’ earlier novels understands that she is making a point about social class: Frances is an upper-middle-class woman being forced into an understanding of just how exhausting and difficult the work of a working-class domestic servant really is. At another level, the repetitive nature of Frances’ housework carries a message about gender rather than social class. This is the line of argument taken by Claire O’Callaghan, who identifies a feminist imperative in Waters’ representation of ‘the cumulative effect of domestic work’, the ‘unrelenting nature of (women’s) domestic ‘duties’, and the ‘continual need for (female) labour’.²⁵ O’Callaghan’s overall argument centres on the 1920s as a decade in which there was a return to Victorian and Edwardian sexual and gender politics after the (relative) freedom offered to women by the First World War. Rather than focusing on the socially dislocating effects of the institution of heterosexuality, *The Paying Guests* is instead interested in exposing the ways ‘in which women grapple with inequality on a daily basis.’²⁶ In other words, the housework – repetitive, mundane, consisting of numerous chores that only have to be done again – can be read as a metaphor for what we might now call ‘everyday sexism’. It is also possible to read Frances’ apparent obsession with keeping the house spotless as a symptom of psychological stress or anxiety, or perhaps as a kind of therapy.

²⁴ Gildersleeve and Sulway, ‘The Violent Pacifist’, p. 68.

²⁵ O’Callaghan, *Gender and Sexual Politics*, p. 184.

²⁶ O’Callaghan, *Gender and Sexual Politics*, p. 156.

I argue here that these interpretations do not sufficiently take into account the dramatic generic shift that takes place halfway through the novel. Prior to Leonard's death, *The Paying Guests* is a lesbian love story, which, for the most part, meets the expectations of the reader familiar with Waters' work. After Leonard's death, it is something much closer to crime fiction. Gildersleeve and Sulway are alone among Waters scholars in identifying a clear link between the housework in the first half of the novel and the aftermath of Leonard's murder in the second, something I develop in this chapter. Frances' housework is how she attempts to impose order on a house that is in a state of disorder, with 'the bathroom outside, her brothers' bedroom [...] now the Barbers' flat, and the dining room [...] her mother's bedroom'.²⁷ Later in the novel, Frances expresses her inward desire to impose this same sense of order when she visits her former lover Christina in her untidy flat: 'She never came here without looking at the disorder of it all in a mixture of envy and despair, imagining the cool, calm, ordered place the rooms would be if they were hers' (p. 43). For Gildersleeve and Sulway, this 'equation of cleaning with moral order constitutes a key tenet of Frances' moral decline' that leads directly to the role she plays in the two crimes that are committed in the novel.²⁸ Frances quite literally cleans up the mess left behind after Lilian's abortion, induced with pills bought illegally from a chemist, and after Leonard's murder. Gildersleeve and Sulway argue that this '[seems] to embed [Frances] further in the sticky, messy social and moral ambiguity of her relationship with Lilian and its accompanying unease about class barriers being crossed and tangled.'²⁹ They identify a contrast between this cleaning up and the housework she does *before* the abortion and the murder, which, they argue, 'emphasises the futility and purposelessness of her life, and the ways in which she has lost hope of ever leaving home.'³⁰ Their ideas are certainly

²⁷ Gildersleeve and Sulway, 'The Violent Pacifist', p. 74.

²⁸ Gildersleeve and Sulway, 'The Violent Pacifist', p. 74.

²⁹ Gildersleeve and Sulway, 'The Violent Pacifist', p. 75.

³⁰ Gildersleeve and Sulway, 'The Violent Pacifist', p. 75.

an influence on my thinking in this chapter, but I argue that Frances' cleaning up of Lilian's and Leonard's blood makes the reader see her everyday housework in a different light, and retrospectively understand that its obsessive repetitiveness was a rehearsal for what she would have to do after the abortion and the murder.

Waters' fifth novel *The Little Stranger*, which also comes under discussion in this chapter, is set in Warwickshire in 1947. The apparently rational male narrator Dr Faraday becomes entangled with the Ayres family when he is called to their crumbling Georgian mansion, Hundreds Hall, to treat Betty, one of their last remaining servants. The Ayres family represent a landed aristocratic class that has been in steep decline since the days when Faraday first visited the house as a boy, and Mrs Ayres, her spinster daughter Caroline, and her war-damaged son Roderick are struggling to run the household with skeleton staff, intermittent electricity, and a once-beautiful building that is now falling into decay and disrepair. The deliberately dry and flat style of Faraday's narration at first conceals what Hilary Mantel calls 'the corrosive power' of his 'class resentment', which emerges slowly as the family are beset by a series of strange happenings that may or may not be the work of a ghost or poltergeist: scorch marks appear on ceilings, childlike scribbles surface spectrally through skirting boards, benign domestic objects attack their owners.³¹ Faraday's rational explanations for these events continue even as the family dog attacks a local child, Roderick is committed to an asylum, Mrs Ayres commits suicide and – finally – Caroline falls to her death from a landing. To an extent, the source of the hauntings remains ambiguous, in that – in the absence of actual ghosts – 'class and the demise of the old order are the most prominent ghosts that haunt the novel.'³² Ann

³¹ Hilary Mantel, 'Haunted by shame: Sarah Waters combines spookiness and social observation in a gripping tale', *The Guardian*, 23rd May 2009 < <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2009/may/23/little-stranger-sarah-waters> > [accessed 4th October 2016].

³² Ann Heilmann, 'Specters of the Victorian in the Neo-Forties Novel: Sarah Waters' *The Little Stranger* and its Intertexts', *Contemporary Women's Writing* 6 (2012), p. 42.

Heilmann offers a thorough examination of the evidence the novel offers to explain the source of the hauntings, and particularly the identity of the ‘You’ to whom Caroline calls just before she falls (p. 482). Heilmann connects a paragraph in the novel in which Faraday discusses with his colleague Seeley the idea of the “*shadow-self* [...] A creature motivated by all the nasty impulses and hungers the conscious mind had hope to keep hidden away” (p. 380; italics in original) to a later passage, in which Faraday has a dream after Caroline has died:³³

And in the slumber I seemed to leave the car, and press on to Hundreds: I saw myself doing it [...] I saw myself cross the silvered landscape and pass like smoke through the Hundreds gate. I saw myself start along the Hundreds drive.

But there I grew panicked and confused – for the drive was changed, was queer and wrong, was impossibly lengthy and tangled, with, at the end of it, nothing but darkness. (p. 47)³⁴

By connecting these two passages together, Heilmann deduces that ‘Caroline, it appears, was confronted by the ‘little stranger’, Faraday’s violent shadow self [...] brought to life by his unconscious during his dream.’³⁵ This is a more convincing argument than that advanced by Gina Wisker, who insists that ‘it is the malignant spirit of the house that eventually turns against Caroline, not Faraday.’³⁶ Heilmann reaches her conclusion about Faraday without disregarding the other possible sources of the strange happenings at Hundreds, venturing, for example, that ‘[w]hether Betty is indeed to blame for any incidents is left to our speculation’, but her

³³ Quoted in Heilmann, ‘Specters of the Victorian’, p. 46.

³⁴ Quoted in Heilmann, ‘Specters of the Victorian’, p. 47.

³⁵ Heilmann, ‘Specters of the Victorian’, p. 47.

³⁶ Gina Wisker, ‘The Feminist Gothic in *The Little Stranger: Troubling Narratives of Continuity and Change*’ in Mitchell (2013), p. 103.

‘shadow-self’ argument makes clear that the ‘malignant spirit’ and Faraday are one and the same thing.³⁷

In *The Little Stranger*, the damaged palimpsest is more spectral, more ghostly, than it is in either *The Night Watch* or *The Paying Guests*, and its scars and marks are more pronounced and more troubling than they are in the other two novels. Georges Letissier contends that Waters promotes ‘a form of progressive sexual politics within [the] traditionally conservative form [...] of the historical romance.’³⁸ The reader’s sense that the historical romance is ‘the submerged textual layer of a palimpsest’ derives from Waters’ engagement with ‘a more recent past [...] whose traumatic persistence is more palpable.’³⁹ Similarly, Ann Heilmann argues that ‘a multiplicity of intertexts [...] hover below and above the surface of *The Little Stranger*.’⁴⁰ Both readings underscore the palimpsestuous structure of the novel, with Heilmann’s perspective in particular pointing to *The Little Stranger*’s position in a continuous, cyclical process of sedimentation. At first, it is the house itself that bears the scars of decay and neglect, so that even in Faraday’s boyhood memory of Hundreds Hall after the First World War, it is clear that it was already entering its decline: he recalls its ‘worn red brick’ and ‘weathered sandstone edges’ that made it look ‘blurred and slightly uncertain – like an ice [...] just beginning to melt in the sun’ (p. 1). By the time he visits again at the end of the next war, its decay is irreversible and dramatic – the ‘lovely weathered edgings’ have ‘fallen completely away’ and ‘[t]he steps leading up to the broad front door [are] cracked, with weeds growing up lushly through the seams’ (p. 5). What can be described as domestic neglect in *The Night Watch* becomes domestic decay in *The Little Stranger*. This is particularly true of that most potent

³⁷ Heilmann, ‘Specters of the Victorian’, p. 49.

³⁸ Georges Letissier, ‘Hauntology as Compromise between Traumatic Realism and Spooky Romance in Sarah Waters’ *The Little Stranger*’, in *Trauma and Romance in Contemporary British Literature*, ed. by Jean-Michel Ganteau and Susana Onega (Abingdon: Routledge, 2013), p. 34.

³⁹ Letissier, ‘Hauntology as Compromise’, p. 34.

⁴⁰ Heilmann, ‘Specters of the Victorian’, p. 53.

object of family history and memory: the photograph album. When Caroline finds boxes of them in a cupboard, they are ‘foxed with damp and spotted with mildew, and practically ruined’ (p. 174). In finding themselves unable to hold back the tide of social progress that threatens their present, the Ayres suffer the decay and spoliation of their past as well.

It soon becomes clear that the Ayres’ physical injuries and imperfections reflect the damage and decay suffered by the house itself. This is subtle at first: Faraday’s critical, judgemental male gaze itemises Caroline’s physical imperfections, taking in her ‘spoiled hands’ with ‘the short nails split’ (p. 24) and her unshaven legs, on which ‘each little hair [is] laden with dust, like an eye-blackened lash’ (p. 45). Helen Davies argues that this reveals how Caroline fails, from Faraday’s perspective, to be appropriately feminine, to the extent that her perceived ugliness becomes part of the novel’s engagement with discourses of disability and illness: ‘[t]he ugly woman is placed on a continuum with a physically impaired man.’⁴¹ The man in question is Caroline’s brother, Roderick Ayres, a former RAF pilot who has been left scarred and physically disabled by a crash in which his aircraft caught fire. His father’s death also makes him the owner of Hundreds Hall and ultimately responsible for maintaining it in impossible circumstances. Thus the more dramatic injuries to the physical fabric of the house, most notably an unexplained fire in Roderick’s room, are the same as his physical scars: Roderick’s body is inscribed with the trauma of war, and the house is inscribed with the trauma of the terminal decline of the upper class. Ideas about injury, illness and violence are also present in *The Night Watch* and *The Paying Guests*. In the former, Helen locks herself in the bathroom and cuts her thigh with a razor when she becomes convinced that her love Julia has been unfaithful, leaving her ‘with two short crimson lines, such as might have been made by a hard but playful swipe

⁴¹ Helen Davies, ‘Written on the Body: Wounded Men and Ugly Women in *The Little Stranger*’, in *Sarah Waters and Contemporary Feminisms*, ed. by Jones and O’Callaghan, p. 159.

from the paw of a cat' (p. 155). Her self-harm can be understood as the means by which she quite literally inscribes her body with self-hatred and shame, and with her fear that Julia is being unfaithful. In both novels, female characters endure the pain and violence of self-induced abortions. In this way, the damaged palimpsest is compacted with different degrees of scars and damage, from the neglect of domestic interiors to moments of strong blood-soaked violence.

Critical contexts

Several responses to *The Night Watch* explore the links the novel makes between bomb-damaged buildings, neglected domestic interiors, and the abject status of the characters. *The Night Watch* begins in 1947, with Kay alone in her shabby rented rooms. She has lost both her lover and her wartime job as an ambulance driver, and wonders if 'she might be becoming part of the faded fabric of the house, dissolving into the gloom which gathered, like dust, in its crazy angles' (p. 4). The space is uncanny, *unheimlich*, a domestic interior that is anything but domestic.⁴² Adele Jones argues that the novel's agenda here is to undermine a relationship between femininity and domesticity in which the domestic space encloses the female subject.⁴³ Kay is unreadable as a female subject: she 'represents the point at which the boundaries between masculinity and femininity, heterosexuality and Other, threaten to collapse.'⁴⁴ The physical structure of the house is also unstable; thus the domestic interior 'attempts to make [Kay] abject' even as it fails to enclose her.⁴⁵ Jessica Gildersleeve takes a different approach in reading *The Night Watch*'s ruined buildings through Dylan Trigg's work on the relationship

⁴² Adele Jones, 'Disrupting the Continuum: Collapsing Time and Space in Sarah Waters' *The Night Watch*', *Journal of Gender Studies* 23 (2013), p. 35.

⁴³ Jones, 'Disrupting the Continuum', p. 34.

⁴⁴ Jones, 'Disrupting the Continuum', p. 34.

⁴⁵ Jones, 'Disrupting the Continuum', p. 34.

between the ruin and the memory of trauma. For Trigg, a ruin is ‘a location of memory, in which trauma took place and continues to be inextricably bound with that location in both an affective and evidential manner.’⁴⁶ There is something clearly palimpsestic here in the idea that the ruin becomes sedimented with the traumatic experiences of those who have inhabited it. There are similarities between Jones’ reading of the novel’s domestic interiors and Gildersleeve’s argument that Trigg’s concept of ‘traumatised architecture’ describes the bomb-damaged building in *The Night Watch*. Jones’ collapsed boundaries are those that demarcate categories of gender and sexual identity; for Gildersleeve, these boundaries are ‘between inside and outside [and] past and present’.⁴⁷ In this sense, their precariousness articulates ‘a kind of traumatic abjection’ through which female subjects are paradoxically held within and cast out from the ‘patriarchal symbolic order’.⁴⁸ Focusing on the 1947 section of the novel, Gildersleeve’s interpretation of the ruin in *The Night Watch* is that it is a metaphor for the unease and anxiety engendered by the post-war return to a period when women’s independence and agency were curtailed.⁴⁹ I argue in this chapter that signs of damage (to buildings, domestic interiors, and bodies) reflect the idea that all queer subjects carry the marks and scars of queer shame. The novel troubles the notion that queer shame is necessarily something that has been expelled from queer subjectivities in the present; it also contends that whether or not today’s queer subjects experience queer shame, their identities bear the spectral imprint of traumatised queer subjects of the past. Shame, self-hatred and abjection can never be wholly denied, even for those who do not experience them directly. This is where I make a link between queer shame and queer postmemory.

⁴⁶ Dylan Trigg, ‘The Place of Trauma: Memory, Hauntings and the Temporality of Ruins’, *Memory Studies* 2 (2009), p. 88.

⁴⁷ Gildersleeve, ‘Anxious Affinities’, p. 85.

⁴⁸ Gildersleeve, ‘Anxious Affinities’ p. 85.

⁴⁹ Gildersleeve, ‘Anxious Affinities’, p. 82.

The concept of postmemory was developed by Marianne Hirsch to describe the kind of inherited trauma experienced by the children of Holocaust survivors, both in the specific sense of blood family and in the more general sense of a first and second generation. It refers not to memories of actual lived experience, but to ‘the relationship that the ‘generation after’ bears to the personal, collective and cultural trauma of those who came before.’⁵⁰ As a ‘*structure of inter- and trans-generational return of traumatic knowledge and embodied experience*’, rather than ‘a movement, method or idea’, postmemory theorises the way in which those who have not been directly affected by trauma can nevertheless experience it in a way that *feels* like memory.⁵¹ It is different from real memory in that it is ‘mediated not by recall but by imaginative investment, projection and creation.’⁵² The ‘post’ prefix acknowledges and accommodates the ambiguity and contradiction inherent in the term; indeed, Hirsch implies that the usefulness of ‘postmemory’ as a concept depends on resisting any imperative to firmly pin down what it means, explaining that ‘the ‘post’ in ‘postmemory’ signals more than a temporal delay and more than a location in an aftermath.’⁵³ She also cites terms like ‘poststructuralism’ and ‘postmodernism’, in which the ‘post’ prefix implies both distance from and a close relationship with ‘structuralism’ and ‘modernism’ – and sometimes, in the case of ‘postcolonialism’, ‘a troubling continuity’.⁵⁴ I argue in this chapter that Sarah Waters’ twentieth-century-set novels explore a relationship between past and present that can be understood in similar terms: the relationship queer subjects in the present have with queer subjects in the past is also characterised by ambiguity and contradiction, by distance and proximity, by rupture and continuity. We see, then, that postmemory is a structure in which the

⁵⁰ Marianne Hirsch, *The Generation of Postmemory: Writing and Visual Culture after the Holocaust* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012), p. 5.

⁵¹ Hirsch, *The Generation of Postmemory*, p. 5.

⁵² Hirsch, *The Generation of Postmemory*, p. 5.

⁵³ Hirsch, *The Generation of Postmemory*, p. 5.

⁵⁴ Hirsch, *The Generation of Postmemory*, p. 5.

past is returned to the present, and in which there is the sedimentation and accumulation of history and memory. In this sense, postmemory is palimpsestic.

I acknowledge that some ethical and methodological care is needed in making use of a concept that was originally developed in relation to the Holocaust. Here I argue that my use of postmemory is legitimated by Hirsch's assertion that the study of memory has a feminist imperative, and by Natasha Alden's work on postmemory in *The Night Watch*. Hirsch writes that:

I turned to the study of memory out of the conviction that, like feminist art, writing, and scholarship, it offered a means to uncover and to restore experiences and life stories that might otherwise remain absent from the historical archive.⁵⁵

Waters' fiction can be seen as part of this wider feminist project of recovery and recuperation; indeed, these words could have been written about her novels, so closely do they echo the critical consensus that has been reached about Waters' engagement with and treatment of the past. In the introduction, I looked closely at how Waters' own academic work insists that any project of lesbian or feminist introspection – the discovery and restoration of 'lost' accounts of women's lives and experiences – must run counter to masculine historiographic and archival practices.⁵⁶ The close connection Hirsch establishes between postmemory and historical fiction is also key. Her reading of Toni Morrison's novel *Beloved* reflects the idea that fiction can recover that which has been lost from or marginalised within the historical record, particularly in terms of trauma: Hirsch observes that '[g]enerations after slavery, Morrison was able to

⁵⁵ Hirsch, *The Generation of Postmemory*, p. 15.

⁵⁶ Laura Doan and Sarah Waters, 'Making up lost time: contemporary lesbian writing and the invention of history', in *Territories of Desire in Queer Culture: Refiguring Contemporary Boundaries*, ed. by David Alderson and Linda Anderson (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000), p. 12.

convey its impacts and traumas more powerfully than contemporary accounts’, so that Denver’s story in the novel raises questions of ‘[h]ow trauma [is] transmitted across generations’, and how it is ‘remembered by those who did not live it or know it in their own bodies.’⁵⁷ In this chapter, I get hold of this core element of Hirsch’s argument in relation to ideas about scarring, damage, illness and injury in Waters’ twentieth-century-set novels. This is not to say that I call into question the extent to which these novels acknowledge the differences between the social and political climates of the 1940s and the 21st century; as Alden argues, Waters ‘does not need to construct the kind of elaborate defences of her gay characters that [Mary] Renault does’ in, for example, *The Charioteer*.⁵⁸ There is no need to take issue with the idea that it is no longer necessary for writers of historical fiction to associate non-normative sexualities with shame and self-hatred. Rather, my point in this chapter is to show that while shame is not necessarily the default position for queer subjectivities in the present, it is difficult to suggest that it can be expelled altogether. The act of ‘looking back’ that Doan and Waters argue is a necessary part of the condition of queer sexuality connects queer subjectivities in the present to a long history of shame, persecution and abjection. In *The Night Watch*, *The Little Stranger* and *The Paying Guests* the damaged palimpsest underlines this connection between queer history and recurring images of scarring and injury. This is postmemory in Hirsch’s terms: the intergenerational transmission of trauma means that queer subjects in the present can ‘remember’ what they have not experienced directly.

In her work on postmemory in contemporary British war fiction, Natasha Alden applies the concept a little differently. She understands the ‘second generation’ in the sense of writers of historical fiction set during both world wars, focusing on Graham Swift, Pat Barker and Ian

⁵⁷ Hirsch, *The Generation of Postmemory*, p. 11.

⁵⁸ Alden, *Reading Behind the Lines*, p. 195.

McEwan as members of a literal ‘second generation’ whose parents had direct experience of war. Although Alden considers how these authors explore the memories of their parents’ trauma through their fiction, the way in which she uses postmemory is broadly similar to Hirsch’s original concept in relation to these three authors. What is interesting here is that Alden has to stretch the definition to accommodate *The Night Watch*, in that the idea of the ‘second generation’ does not apply in the literal sense: Waters’ writing is not inspired or influenced by the direct experiences of her parents. Instead, Alden sees Waters as part of a ‘second generation’ of writers of lesbian and gay fiction, who, while ‘remembering’ a history of shame and abjection, are able ‘for the first time [...] to narrate lesbian history [...] openly, and [...] publicly draw connections between themselves and gay women in the past.’⁵⁹ In taking this approach to postmemory in relation to Waters, Alden acknowledges that constructing a lesbian subjectivity in the present necessarily involves questions of how to manage the shame and persecution of queer history. Thus writers of lesbian and gay fiction inevitably inherit a kind of ‘dual trauma’, whereby queer subjects know that their history is one of oppression and suffering, but also that this history has been lost or silenced. I discuss this in further detail in Chapter 1.⁶⁰

It is this idea of dual trauma that is of use to me in relation to the damaged palimpsest in Waters’ twentieth-century-set novels. For queer subjectivities in the present, there is both the difficulty inherent in the very idea of constructing a history at all, and the knowledge that where this history does exist it is often one of oppression. Thus a lesbian living in the twenty-first century has not had to endure the House of Commons debating whether ‘disgusting’ and ‘gross’ practices between women should be outlawed, but the ghostly presence of women who *did*

⁵⁹ Alden, *Reading Behind the Lines*, p. 180.

⁶⁰ Alden, *Reading Behind the Lines*, p. 180.

endure these things produces a kind of postmemorial trauma that cannot be effaced in the construction of a modern lesbian identity.⁶¹ Shame and abjection are, in other words, part of the DNA of queer subjectivities. Alden goes on to say that while lesbian and gay fiction can now offer the ‘happy ending’ that was simply not available to those writing in the past, ‘authors such as Waters [...] go beyond this, problematising and dramatising the historiographic literary conventions they rely on.’⁶² This points to precisely the kind of ambiguity and complexity we see in Waters’ approach to history and the past: the damaged palimpsest reveals that negotiating the tension between celebrating the hard-won freedoms of the present and acknowledging the persecution of the past is never a straightforward process. As I explained in the introduction, there is now a ‘second generation’ of lesbian and gay people in the twenty-first century who can enjoy certain rights and freedoms – civil partnerships and gay marriage, equality legislation, a greater degree of social and cultural acceptance – that have come about since the late 1990s. The continued presence of homophobia is however, a stark reminder that queer people of today are only at one generational remove from their counterparts who did *not* experience these rights and freedoms. This, I argue, is what the damaged palimpsest expresses; following Alden, I stretch and manipulate the concept of postmemory to accommodate this particular sense of a ‘second generation’ in Waters’ fiction.

My approach, however, differs from Alden’s in one key respect. Alden argues that Waters takes care to replicate the ‘more detached’ tone of novels of the period, but otherwise ‘deviates significantly from her literary source material’ – namely, the gay fiction of the period by Mary Renault and others – in her representation of lesbian and gay lives of the 1940s. In particular, Alden argues that:

⁶¹ See Rebecca Jennings, *A Lesbian History of Britain: Love and Sex between Women Since 1500* (Oxford: Greenwood World Publishing, 2007), for a detailed account of the attempt made in 1921 to introduce legislation against lesbian sexuality.

⁶² Alden, *Reading Behind the Lines*, p. 181.

Waters [...] edits out some of the most frequent and powerful elements of contemporary [i.e. 1940s] gay fiction, chiefly the need to depict the abjection of gay people, the misery of having to live in secret, the shame and self-loathing many gay characters in contemporary fiction were shown to feel, and the frequent recourse to sexology or Freudian analysis of how they had been 'warped' into perversity.⁶³

At first, it seems difficult to argue with this. In the 1947 section of *The Night Watch*, her lover has left her for somebody else; in this matter at least, Kay's sexual orientation is incidental, rather than her defining characteristic. The matter of her wartime role as an ambulance driver is rather more problematic. Alden acknowledges Waters' debt to Radclyffe Hall's *Miss Ogilvy Finds Herself* (1926) here: Kay, like Miss Ogilvy, experiences 'despair' at losing 'her active, purposeful role in wartime.'⁶⁴ Where *The Night Watch* differs, Alden argues, is that Kay 'does not view herself as inverted'; 'the discourse of intense shame, self-loathing and theorising about psychological retardation [...] is notable by its absence.'⁶⁵ I argue that the absence of an obvious discourse is not the same thing as the absence of the idea that queer subjectivity is associated with shame. Rather, then, than 'editing out' the secrecy, shame and self-loathing, the novel's preoccupation with dust, dirt, damage, decay and neglect is the means by which Waters leaves them in. They are not front and centre, as they are in Han Suyin's *Winter Love* and other novels of the period, which 'feature histrionic protagonists wreaking emotional havoc on each other.'⁶⁶ They are, in a palimpsestic sense, hidden, in that they appear in symbolic form as scars and marks on domestic interiors and buildings.

⁶³ Alden, *Reading Behind the Lines*, p. 193.

⁶⁴ Alden, *Reading Behind the Lines*, p. 194.

⁶⁵ Alden, *Reading Behind the Lines*, p. 195.

⁶⁶ Alden, *Reading Behind the Lines*, p. 195.

At this point it is worth examining the damaged palimpsest more closely to show how reading these novels through this metaphor lends weight to the idea that queer shame is a fundamental constituent of queer subjectivity. As we have seen, Alden understands the marginalisation of queer history within the mainstream historical record as a process of elision. In terms of the palimpsest, this points to the way in which layers of history become so compacted that accounts of lesbian lives and experiences are rendered invisible and irretrievable – they are flattened and squashed, so to speak. This in itself implies a certain degree of damage. Recovering this lesbian history is a matter of teasing the layers of the palimpsest apart; what is found between them is delicate and fragile and must be handled with great care. When this does not happen, *further* damage occurs. It is impossible to bring accounts of queer lives and experiences into the light without causing damage to that which is already damaged; furthermore, greater visibility is associated with a greater risk of punitive regulation, often in the form of verbal and physical homophobic violence. Thus we see that the marks of queer shame exist on a kind of spectrum, ranging from domestic clutter and detritus to the shocking physicality of Lilian and Viv's life-threatening illegal abortions, and Leonard's murder.

In terms of the damaged palimpsest in these novels, I draw together the concepts of postmemory and queer shame. Just as postmemory conceptualises the way in which queer subjects in the present can 'remember' the abjection suffered by the 'generation before', queer shame as a concept insists that shame is an inevitable part of queer subjectivity:

Can there be a homosexual subject who is *not* formed from shame? In any personal trajectory, the growing consciousness of same-sex desire must, in a Western context, give rise to feelings of difference and exclusion. An identity may be imposed, or it may be wished for, but there is ultimately no choice, if one wants to live out erotic

attachment to one's own gender, in experiencing some form of ascribed exclusion/prohibition.⁶⁷

We can apply this understanding of queer shame to *The Night Watch* without contradicting Alden's contention that the 1940s discourse of self-loathing, secrecy and sexology is absent from the novel. Munt's argument here underlines the amorphous nature of queer shame over the period between the setting of Waters' novel and the present day: it changes and adapts, but never disappears altogether. In my reading of the damaged palimpsest I argue that the 1940s discourse to which Alden refers is not quite edited out, but rather displaced by something closer to Munt's understanding of queer shame here. The marks and scars that constitute the damaged palimpsest – the domestic detritus in *The Night Watch*, the scorch marks that appear to emerge from *beneath* the surface of a wooden skirting board in *The Little Stranger*, the ever-present dust against which Frances labours in *The Paying Guests* – are often stealthy and insidious. They accumulate slowly and accrue over time through iterative processes of erasure and reinscription. In this sense, they offer a subtle comment on the nature of queer shame in the twenty-first century: it is sometimes below the surface and sometimes above it, yet resistant to the notion that it is no longer a concern. This contrasts with – while still being connected to – the sexual and gender politics of gay and lesbian novels of the 1940s or earlier, whose writers are obliged by the prevailing cultural climate of the period to take the more 'sledgehammer' approach of the 'shame and self-loathing' discourse.

According to Emma Parker, both *The Night Watch* and *The Paying Guests* exemplify 'a post-millennial queer melancholia' that '[departs] markedly from Waters' debut.'⁶⁸ Rather than

⁶⁷ Sally Munt, *Queer Attachments: The Cultural Politics of Shame* (Aldershot: Ashgate Publishing, 2008), p. 95.

⁶⁸ Emma Parker, 'Contemporary Lesbian Fiction: Into the Twenty-First Century' in *The Cambridge Companion to Lesbian Literature*, ed. by Jodie Medd (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), p. 215.

yoking her representation of 1920s and 1940s queer lives to contemporary discourses of shame and self-loathing, Waters examines the complexities and contradictions inherent in twenty-first century queer subjectivities. Where the damaged palimpsest *is* more violent and less subtle – Helen’s self-harm in *The Night Watch*, Leonard’s murder in *The Paying Guests*, the grim illegal abortions in both – the novels attend, in Heather Love’s terms, to ‘specific histories of homophobic exclusion and violence [...] as well as their effects.’⁶⁹ Waters’ depiction of Frances’ lesbian sexuality in *The Paying Guests* captures the ambivalence and ambiguity of queer identities in a twenty-first century context: Frances declares her feelings for Lilian with a certain degree of confidence, but in the past has felt the shame of having an earlier lesbian affair discovered by her mother. These novels assert that shame cannot be expelled from queer identity, even in a climate of much greater acceptance. Heather Love points to the value of queer shame as a way of ‘claiming homosexual identity in the face of a call to abandon it’, even in the teeth of a gay pride discourse that makes it ‘seem shaming to hold on to an identity that cannot be uncoupled from violence, suffering, and loss.’⁷⁰ Queer shame is not a dominant force sweeping away all other aspects of queer identity, but neither is it something that no longer exists. It cannot be uncoupled from queerness. In the novels, this link is sometimes strong, and sometimes fragile; it is a relationship that is characterised by fracture and discontinuity. This idea that queer shame is something that can return from the past to haunt queer subjects in the present links queer shame to postmemory.

Certain critical responses to Waters’ twentieth-century-set novels examine their preoccupation with scarring, illness and injury. In *The Night Watch*, Viv’s response to the worthless bits of bric-a-brac Duncan collects is ‘affective, bodily’, one of ‘disgust’.⁷¹ She considers how ‘she

⁶⁹ Heather Love, *Feeling Backward: Loss and the Politics of Queer History* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2009), p. 30.

⁷⁰ Love, *Feeling Backward*, p. 30.

⁷¹ Mitchell, ‘What does it feel like to be an anachronism?’, p. 90.

could never help thinking of the mouths that had touched the china, the grubby hands and sweating heads that had rubbed the cushions bald' (p. 27). In a later chapter, I consider how Duncan's objects reveal the materiality rather than the textuality of history, in that they become sedimented with traces of the past. Mitchell argues that these 'traces' of 'past bodies' collapse the distinction between past and present.⁷² In terms of this chapter, I argue that Viv's disgust can be read as a marker of queer shame, given that her heterosexuality is queered by an affair with a married man that places her outside heteronormative parameters of fidelity and monogamy. There is a link here with her similar reaction to the traces of themselves that the other women in her boarding house leave behind, all of which – 'powder', 'scent', 'lipstick marks' and 'razored legs' – are signifiers of heterosexual femininity (p. 231). Viv's separateness from these markers – and the corresponding queerness, the otherness, in her heterosexual identity – is signalled by the fact that it is implied that she somehow does *not* leave behind these traces herself. This particular kind of gendered domestic detritus can be read, as Jessica Gildersleeve argues, as a marker of women's *déréliction* in Irigaray's terms: Viv's affective response to traces of the women she shares her living space with points to 'the denial of woman-identified relationships in contemporary culture.'⁷³ There is, however, an implication that there *are* connections between the women who leave these traces – it is, after all, a boarding house, in which women live, eat and sleep communally. The point is that Viv's affair with a married man places her outside this network; her declaration that she is 'sick of' these bodily traces is, therefore, a symptom of her queer shame, even as a heterosexual woman.

The Little Stranger is different in that its narrative has a background of illness, disease and injury. Faraday is called to Hundreds Hall for the first time since his boyhood to treat the Ayres'

⁷² Mitchell, 'What does it feel like to be an anachronism?', p. 90.

⁷³ Gildersleeve, 'Anxious Affinities', p. 83.

servant, Betty, whose mysterious illness is partly feigned and partly attributable to anxiety. Lucie Armitt details how this background of illness precedes the start of the story, in that the father, Colonel Ayres, died of an aneurysm, the Ayres' first-born daughter died of diphtheria in childhood, and Roderick Ayres, the heir to the estate, was badly wounded and scarred during the war. Although *The Little Stranger* is a significant departure from Waters' earlier work in its lack of any lesbian or gay relationships, there is, as critics have pointed out, a sense in which certain characters and relationships are presented as queer: Caroline Ayres, the daughter, fails to be appropriately feminine from the perspective of Faraday's punitive, heteronormative gaze.⁷⁴ Claire O'Callaghan and Emma Parker also observe how Waters' description of Faraday's treatment of Roderick's injured leg is couched in language heavy with homoerotic symbolism.⁷⁵ Images of physical damage to bodies are not confined to the characters: Monica Germanà argues that themes of psychosis and anxiety extend to the representation of the house itself, something which '[encourages] a reading of the decaying mansion as organic entity, not simply accommodating the supernatural episodes [...] but nurturing the malevolent force that drives all of its inhabitants away.'⁷⁶ Ann Heilmann argues that 'mother and son are assailed by the return of the repressed' and this is indeed a novel in which all sorts of things 'come back'.⁷⁷ These include the resurgent working class, Roderick's experiences of wartime trauma, Faraday's memories of his childhood shame and embarrassment, and the Victorian texts from which Waters draws her intertextual references: in particular, Heilmann notes the echoes of *Wuthering Heights* in the injuries Mrs Ayres sustains to her wrists when she tries to escape from the nursery.⁷⁸ Emma Parker also considers Betty's hands, which have 'calluses' and are

⁷⁴ Davies, 'Written on the Body', p. 158.

⁷⁵ Emma Parker, 'The Country House Revisited: Sarah Waters' *The Little Stranger*' in *Contemporary Critical Perspectives*, ed. by Mitchell, p. 110; O'Callaghan, *Gender and Sexual Politics*, p. 142.

⁷⁶ Monica Germanà, 'The Death of the Lady: Haunted Garments and (Re-)Possession in *The Little Stranger*' in *Contemporary Critical Perspectives*, ed. by Kaye Mitchell, p. 116.

⁷⁷ Heilmann, 'Specters of the Victorian', p. 43.

⁷⁸ Heilmann, 'Specters of the Victorian', p. 43.

‘thickened and stained’, undermining the Ayres’ ‘romanticis[ing] of domestic work’.⁷⁹ In all these examples, there is a sense of bodies and buildings being scarred and marked by what has gone before: Mrs Ayres’ injuries, for example, can be understood in terms of traumatic memory, of her daughter’s death returning to haunt the present. This is not to imply that queer shame can be applied to all the characters in the novel: Caroline’s mother is clearly not meant to be read as a queer character. The link between queer shame and queer postmemory can be made through Caroline herself, whose lack of appropriate femininity and ‘spinster’ status juxtaposes her with her much more obviously ‘straight’ mother.

Frances’ housework in *The Paying Guests*

Waters’ most recent novel opens with the arrival of Lilian and Leonard Barber, the ‘paying guests’ of the title, who are associated with domestic clutter and disorder from the very beginning. As they prepare to unload their possessions from the removal van, Frances sees what is inside it:

[A] mess of bursting suitcases, a tangle of chair and table legs, bundle after bundle of bedding and rugs, a portable gramophone, a wicker birdcage, a bronze-effect ashtray on a marbled stand ... The thought that all these items were about to be brought into her home – and that the couple, who were not quite the couple she remembered, who were younger, and brasher, were going to bring them, and set them out, and make their own home, brashly, among them – the thought brought on a flutter of panic. (p. 6)

⁷⁹ Parker, ‘The Country House Revisited’, p. 103.

The Barbers' chaotic collection of possessions is symbolic of the chaos that the couple will bring into Frances' life. Her sense that she is 'opening up the house to thieves and invaders' (p. 6) reflects the social class upheaval of the post-war period. Frances and her mother remain tied to the class and gender politics of the Edwardian and Victorian eras, with Frances feeling acutely conscious of 'her pinned-up hair' and her 'blouse tucked into her high-waisted skirt, after the fashion of the War, which was already four years over' (p. 7). The Barbers' status as members of the new 'clerk class' lends them a cultural legitimacy that throws the Wrays' anachronism into sharp relief. At one level, this is what Lilian and Leonard's possessions symbolise: the invasion of the social and cultural territory of the upper middle classes by a new, brash, upwardly mobile upper working class. There is, however, much more going on here. The lesbian affair between Frances and Lilian is signposted by the vaguely sexual connotations of the 'tangle of chair and table legs'; the 'bundle after bundle of bedding and rugs' are those on which Lilian and Frances will make love, and on which Leonard will be murdered. The cataphoric smuggling into the list of the 'bronze-effect ashtray on a marble stand' is an early flagging up of the murder weapon, a device straight out of detective fiction. Thus the Barbers palimpsestically inscribe Frances' domestic space with their own class and gender politics, with dramatic and violent results.

The novel's preoccupation with 'stuff' is developed through the frequent and lengthy references to Frances' housework. This is not ordinary, manageable housework, done when necessary to keep the worst of the dirt at bay: it is obsessive, relentless and extreme. This raises a number of questions. Why does Frances experience such an intense and irrational sense of frustration when 'even the things inside [a china cabinet] [grow] dusty and [have] to be wiped', so that she '[longs] to take each fiddly cup and saucer and break it in two' (p. 25)? Why does she approach the housework as though it is an athletic discipline with a set of prescribed

techniques she must master, like ‘passing the wrung cloth over the floor in one supple, unbroken movement’ (p. 25)? Why does she experience a disproportionate sense of achievement, even pleasure, when the difficult jobs are completed, admiring ‘how pleasing each glossy tile [is]’ (p. 25)? Why does she devote so many hours to housework when she knows that the results will ‘fade in about five minutes’ (p. 25)? In particular, why does she hate the idea of doing these chores in front of her mother, waiting for Mrs Wray to leave the house before she starts? These are the questions that are not answered by other readings of Frances’ housework. I have two key arguments here: firstly, that the relentless processes of the accumulation and removal of dirt and dust involved in the housework, and the frustration, anxiety, exhaustion, pride and sense of achievement associated with them, precisely mirror what happens after Leonard’s murder. Frances must not just conceal, but *keep* concealed, the evidence of this criminal act – bodily traces like hair and blood, but also the true story of what has really happened to Leonard – from the police. Their efforts to piece together an accurate account of what happened on the night in question are like the dust and dirt in the house: the truth constantly threatens to break through Frances’ flimsy layer of deceit to the surface, and only by constant effort and maintenance can it be kept obscured. Secondly, I argue that the housework is both expressive and constitutive of Frances’ queer shame. It is made clear several times in the novel that she is embarrassed and ashamed at the thought of doing her chores when her mother is at home; she saves ‘the very heaviest of the housework [...] for those mornings and afternoons when she [can] rely on her mother being safely out of the way’ (p. 24). The obvious way of reading this is to say that Frances’ embarrassment is merely a symptom of her social class anxiety: she does not want her mother to witness her well-bred daughter doing work that should be done by a working-class domestic servant. This, however, overlooks the way Frances’ sense of shame links the housework with other things she did not or does not want her mother to know about: her earlier lesbian relationship with her friend Christina, the

affair with Lilian, and Leonard's murder. All these things are linked directly or indirectly with Frances' lesbian identity.

The first lengthy description of Frances' chores at their most extreme and rigorous makes an explicit connection between the housework and her sexual frustration:

There were longings, there were desires ... But they were physical matters, mostly, and she had no last-century inhibitions about dealing with that sort of thing. It was amazing, in fact, she reflected, as she repositioned her mop and bucket and started on a new stretch of tile, it was astonishing how satisfactorily the business could be taken care of, even in the middle of the day, even with her mother in the house, simply by slipping up to her bedroom for an odd few minutes, perhaps as a break between peeling parsnips or waiting for the dough to rise – (p. 26.)

Here, sexual satisfaction has become for Frances something to be 'dealt with' to be attended to as a routine matter between household chores; it is both a break from and an extension of mopping the tiles, 'peeling parsnips' and 'waiting for the dough to rise'. In this way, it is paradoxically decoupled from any sexual or erotic element. The crucial factor in this is that Frances is not having her 'longings' and 'desires' satisfied by someone else; she has to assuage them herself. Her blithe assertion that she has 'no last-century inhibitions about dealing with that sort of thing' is betrayed by her awkwardness when she visits her former lover, Christina, early in the novel. Christina's scruffy, Bohemian flat is artfully distressed and untidy, with 'piles of books and papers on the floor' and a 'balding velveteen armchair' with 'a tray balanced on it, bearing the remains of two breakfasts: sticky egg cups and dirty mugs' (p. 41). Frances goes straight into housework mode, passing the tray to Christina so that she can sit

down. The contrast between Frances' exacting, disciplined approach to housework and Christina's casual untidiness underlines the differences between their queer subjectivities. Their affair ended when Frances' mother found their love letters, and Frances is now a spinster, living in the family home with her mother, while Christina, with her up-to-the-minute 'shingled' haircut lives independently with a new lover, Stevie. (p. 42). The visit to Christina's flat highlights Frances' failure as a modern lesbian subject, aligning her sexual and gender politics not with the modern age Christina is able to inhabit with such confidence, but with the Victorian attitudes and morality of her mother. The novel is clearly influenced here by Radclyffe Hall's *The Unlit Lamp* (1924), in which the central character, Joan Ogden, finds that her mother's suffocating influence prevents her from pursuing a life of independence and happiness with Elizabeth, her former governess. Frances' inability to inhabit the identity of a modern lesbian subject is also linked to the specificity of the novel's 1922 setting, and to the fact that 'a lesbian subculture developed more slowly and less visibly than a gay male subculture'.⁸⁰ Laura Doan has shown that the obscenity trial of Radclyffe Hall's novel *The Well of Loneliness* (1928) 'profoundly changed public awareness of lesbianism', becoming 'the crystallising moment in the construction of a visible modern English lesbian subculture'; prior to this period, the adoption of masculine styles of clothing would not necessarily have been seen as a marker of lesbian sexuality.⁸¹ Christina's haircut, in 1922, makes Frances seem unfashionable in comparison, but it is not explicitly associated with her sexual and gender identity.

Frances' relationship with her mother, particularly in terms of Mrs Wray's subtle but insistent stranglehold on her daughter's personal life and sexual identity, is connected to the housework

⁸⁰ Laura Doan, *Fashioning Sapphism: The Origins of a Modern English Lesbian Culture* (New York, Columbia University Press, 2001), p. xii.

⁸¹ Doan, *Fashioning Sapphism*, pp. xii – xiii.

motif. Mrs Wray's surveillance of her daughter is characterised by a kind of nosiness, a sort of motherly, curtain-twitching, poking-your-nose-in snooping and prying, that inhibits Frances from fully inhabiting her identity as a lesbian woman, and instead forces her into the abject category of spinster. As Kate Webb observes in her review of *The Paying Guests*, Frances is 'a fraud. Outwardly dutiful and unremarkable, she veers in her interior life between fantasies of rebellion and the dread of exposure, forever wondering 'Will mother hear?''⁸² This is perfectly exemplified by Mrs Wray's response to an episode in which Frances, Lilian and Leonard play a drunken game of strip Snakes and Ladders one evening, after which Frances is tormented by a recurring image of 'Lilian, groping for the clasp of her suspender' and 'the silk stocking coming down, over and over again' (p. 164). The image, with its cinematic patterns of rewinding and repetition, is part of how the metaphor of the palimpsest works in the novel – but more important still is the way that the alcohol-induced loosening of inhibitions makes Frances acutely aware of her powerful sexual and physical desire for Lilian. We understand here that she briefly breaks free from the gender and sexual politics imposed on her by mother, but can only do so in a chaotic and uncontrolled way, and not on her own terms. Her mother's snooping gaze is at its most penetrating the morning after this episode, when Frances is unable to disguise her hangover. Mrs Wray's tone is one of judgemental, sneering disapproval; she both chastises Frances for being too old to behave in such a way – “Really, Frances, you look dreadfully done up! You must remember, you aren't as young as Mr and Mrs Barber.” (p. 168) – and treats her like a naughty teenager who has gone off the rails:

‘Mr Barber is a man, with a man's constitution.’

‘What a very Victorian thing to say.’

⁸² Kate Webb, 'One small brave thing', *Times Literary Supplement*, 24th October 2017
<<https://katewebb.wordpress.com/2014/11/03/sarah-waters-the-paying-guests-tls/>>
[accessed 12th January 2018].

‘Yes, well, as I’ve often pointed out, the Victorians are much maligned. How old is Mrs Barber?’ (p. 168)

Frances then lies to her mother, saying that she thinks Lilian is “twenty-four or five” when ‘she [knows] very well that she is ‘twenty-two’ (p. 168). This provides one of the many clues in the narrative that Mrs Barber has a mother’s instinct for a daughter’s white lie:

So her mother surprised her by narrowing her eyes in a sceptical way and saying, ‘Well, she has a very youthful air indeed for a woman of five-and-twenty. As for Snakes and Ladders –’

‘A nice Victorian game.’

‘A nice noisy one, apparently! Noisier than I remembered it. I’m amazed you were up to playing. Your head was too sore, I think, for bridge at Mrs Playfair’s.’

Frances couldn’t answer. She’d had another flashing vision of Lilian’s stocking coming down. If her mother knew about that! (p. 168)

It is not just Frances’ sarcastic reference to the ‘nice Victorian game’ that locates Mrs Wray’s attitude to Frances’ behaviour firmly in the nineteenth century: there is also her anachronistic turn of phrase – ‘five-and-twenty’ – and the reference to ‘bridge’, that most elderly and unglamorous of hobbies, which Mrs Wray expects Frances to participate in. The unfortunate timing of Frances’ vision of ‘Lilian’s stocking coming down’ also establishes a connection between Mrs Wray’s Victorian suspicion and the affair between Frances and Lilian. This connection will later prove crucial in Frances’ efforts to construct a false version of events and so conceal the truth about Leonard’s murder.

Once Lilian and Frances' affair begins, the reader naturally expects that it will not take long for Mrs Wray to become suspicious. The moment comes when she almost catches them in an act of cunnilingus:

And then Frances heard it too: a creak, a footstep, leaving the stairs. Before she could react, there came a voice: 'Frances? Are you up here?'

It was her mother, out on the landing, just on the other side of the not-quite-shut sitting room door.

They leapt to their feet as if shot through with electricity. (p. 257)

Mrs Wray plays the role of the suspicious detective here: sneaking up on the suspect quietly to avoid detection, asking probing questions, hovering on the landing, trying to listen to what is happening on the other side of the sitting room door. As Frances and Lilian frantically scramble for their clothing, Lilian 'madly wiping her mouth and chin', Frances has to come up with a plausible explanation for their dishevelled appearance (p. 257):

'I've been up here, with Lilian.'

Her mother was paying more attention to her now. 'Yes? What have you been doing? You look as though you'd run a race!'

'Do I! Frances laughed. 'Oh, Lilian's been teaching me a dance step.'

It was the first thing that came to mind. But she'd had to say something to account for her manner and appearance. [...] Thinking to use a small lie to deflect attention from a larger one – because that was a strategy that had sometimes worked for her in the past – she added, in a coming-clean sort of way, 'We've been smoking, too. I didn't want you to be bothered by it.' (p. 258)

This mirrors – albeit on a smaller and less dramatic scale – what will happen later, when Frances has to cover up the truth about Leonard’s murder. Both are high-risk, unplanned events, after which Frances takes responsibility for superimposing the truth with a lie, in this case creating a *literal* smokescreen to obscure her ‘uncombed hair’ and ‘the colour in her cheeks’ (p. 258). Mrs Wray’s remark that the women look as though they’ve ‘run a race’ nevertheless suggests that she knows, in the way that only mothers do, exactly what they’ve been up to. Her suspicion is explicitly linked later to Leonard’s murder, after which Christina, Frances’ former lover, sends a telegram to the house. Mrs Wray realises that this means Frances and Christina have had contact. She expresses her disapproval this time in much stronger and more direct terms:

‘Go ahead and see her, if you must. I don’t like your friendship with her, I don’t understand it, I don’t respect it; I never shall. But what I like even less is your deceit. On top of everything that’s happened! I don’t know what to expect next! I feel I hardly know you at the moment. What else have you lied to me about?’ (p. 444-5)

This is, as far as Mrs Wray is concerned, a rhetorical question – but the dramatic irony here means that there is an answer: Frances has lied to her mother about Lilian’s abortion, and Leonard’s death. Until this point, Mrs Wray skirts around the edges of Frances’ lesbian sexuality, making her suspicion evident but stopping short of any direct accusation. This is a key passage because it makes an association between Frances’ lesbian subjectivity and the characteristics of queer shame – namely, hiding, deceit, and what Sally Munt refers to as the imposition of an identity.⁸³ Mrs Wray’s use of the euphemism ‘friendship’ in the context of

⁸³ Munt, *Queer Attachments*, p. 95.

shame, deceit and a freely expressed lack of ‘understanding’ and ‘respect’ decides Frances’ sexual identity for her, at the same time as uncoupling that identity from any possibility of independence and autonomy: Frances cannot keep anything secret from her mother. In particular, the explicit fracturing of the mother-daughter relationship – “‘I feel I hardly know you at the moment. What else have you lied to me about?’” – suggests, in terms of queer shame, the inevitable ‘feelings of difference and exclusion’ that lead to ‘some form of ascribed [...] prohibition’.⁸⁴ At one level, the novel interrogates the difficulty of inhabiting a queer identity in the context of the tension in the Wray household between Frances’ nascent modernism and Mrs Wray’s suffocating Victorianism, but on another it also speaks to late twentieth and early twenty-first century concerns about the suppression of queer shame within gay pride discourses. The refusal of any such discourse in *The Paying Guests* acknowledges that shame itself has become something to be ashamed of, rather than recovered and recuperated as an inevitable – and necessary – part of the queer project of retrospection.

The patterns of repetition in Waters’ descriptions of Frances’ housework are also linked to the relationship between Frances and Lilian. Early in the novel, after the two women have spent some time getting to know each other, Frances feels ‘some kind of shift occur between them’, which she feels is like ‘the white of an egg growing pearly in hot water, a milk sauce thickening in the pan. It was as subtle yet as tangible as that’ (91). There is the sense here of the sensuousness of the palimpsest, of lesbian desire as a process of chemical – or alchemical – transformation. This moment is followed shortly afterwards by one in which Lilian’s marriage to Leonard is expressed in obviously palimpsestic terms:

⁸⁴ Munt, *Queer Attachments*, p. 43.

She had found a spot on the rail where the paint was chipped, exposing several older colours, right down to the pale raw wood beneath. Running her fingers over the flaw, she said, ‘You don’t think about all these colours when everything’s going alright; you’d go mad if you did. [...] But those colours are there, all the same. All the quarrels, and the bits of unkindness. And every so often something happens to put a chip right through; and then you can’t *not* think of them. (p. 101)

The chipped paint on the bandstand rail expresses the simultaneity of the different time periods in Lilian and Leonard’s marriage. Palimpsestic processes of sedimentation and accumulation are figured in terms of damage and injury, with each new layer of paint representing a ‘quarrel’ or ‘unkindness’ in their relationship. As I explore later in this chapter, there are other examples of the damaged palimpsest in Waters’ fiction, but they are more subtly rendered: what is distinctive about the bandstand rail is that the idea of damage and injury is at the centre of the metaphor. The palimpsestic revealing of the hidden layers is not something that has happened slowly over time, and they are not ghostly or spectral, as they are in the other examples considered here. Instead, they have been revealed suddenly and with the mild but insistent violence suggested by the verb ‘chip’. The ‘pale, raw wood’ hints at the vulnerability of Lilian’s body, despite the implication that the violence is verbal rather than physical; the moments when ‘something happens to put a chip right through’ disrupt the notion of the palimpsest as chemical and sensuous. Even the violence itself is palimpsestic – a series of small, repeated actions that have a cumulative effect over time.

The patterns and rhythms of the housework change after Frances and Lilian’s relationship begins, but their palimpsestic nature remains the same. This is part of the way in which Frances’ chores can later be seen as preparation for the clean-up operation after Leonard’s murder. In

contrast to Waters' neo-Victorian fiction, ghostliness and spectrality are absent from the narrative, but there is nevertheless the sense in which the erasure, reinscription and repetition of the clean-up operation echo the erasure, reinscription and repetition of Frances' chores, almost as though the false stories she constructs for her mother and the police are 'haunted' by the faint imprint of her cleaning and dusting and polishing. There is also something of the idea of haunting in the way that this reading of the housework is only possible through hindsight, or through re-reading. The argument that Waters' fiction is concerned with this notion of retrospection, of 'going back', is, as I have discussed earlier, usually understood in terms of her recovery and recuperation of lost lesbian lives and histories through their insertion into familiar historical narratives (Victorian London, the Blitz). In *The Paying Guests*, this idea is more subtly explored through the way in which the impulsive, obsessive nature of Frances' housework can only be rationalised and understood after the women have killed Leonard.

The changes in the housework are directly linked to the intensity of Frances and Lilian's desire for each other, so much so that the narrative moves with startling suddenness from one to the other. Lilian '[puts] her mouth to Frances' breasts, her fingers between Frances' legs' and tells her that "'You feel like velvet, Frances. [...] You feel like wine. My hand feels drunk'" (p. 244). Immediately afterwards, we switch to Frances' perspective, which is concerned with how 'the routines of the house went on'. Again, there is a sense of chemical change, of something moving and shifting:

If milk was to be kept from souring it had to be scalded as soon as it arrived. Jam turned sugary in the jar. Ants invaded the larder. Frances' clothes clung to her as she worked, the dust rising from her brooms and fastening itself to her perspiring arms and face. But

she did it all without fuss; she seemed to have the strength of a battalion of servants. (p. 244)

The intensity of Frances' housework increases as the intensity of the mutual desire between the women – and its physical expression – also increases. The heat here is heavily symbolic of the 'heat' of their relationship; Waters even manages to invest mundane household chores with sexual connotations – Frances' clothes 'cling' to her, the dust 'rises' before 'fastening itself' (note the sense of deliberate possession in the grammar of this sentence, in place of the more obvious and less physical 'settling on') to her 'perspiring arms and face'. What has changed is that her chores no longer seem physically exhausting. There is a suggestion here of something that runs counter to queer shame narratives, something that has been lost in a twenty-first century context of greater queer visibility and acceptance – the *joy* of secrecy, the thrill of hiding. Frances' new relationship with Lilian gives her 'the strength of a battalion of servants' – in other words, the dynamic, intoxicating sense of life and energy that only an intense new affair can bring.

The link between the housework and Frances and Lilian's relationship is developed further when Lilian and Leonard go away on holiday, forcing a brief separation between the two women and an inevitable lull in their intimacy. Frances finds that it is, 'in some ways [...] a relief to be rid of them' (p. 284). She realises that 'the whole furtive business of being with Lilian, of finding and securing and making the most of scraps of time with her' has 'been crushing the life out of her', and, for the first time, she lets the housework go (p. 284). This in itself is remarkable, given her relentless attention to it thus far, but what is more remarkable still is that this lapse is explicitly associated with feelings of shame:

She was ashamed [...] to discover how badly she had let things slip: all she could see were grubby corners, dusty plasterwork, finger-marks, smears. She fetched a pencil and a piece of paper and drew up a list of tasks. (p. 284)

The colloquial phrase ‘let things slip’ is of particular significance here in anticipating her later efforts to prevent the police, her mother and Leonard’s family from discovering the truth about his death. It suggests the need for constant surveillance – of both self and others – and constant maintenance. It is implied that if ‘things’ are allowed to ‘slip’, there will be grave consequences of some kind. Here, these consequences *appear* to be relatively mild. However, the signs of Frances’ uncharacteristic lack of attention to the housework are the physical, bodily nature of the traces of themselves that others leave behind – dust, ‘finger-marks’ (notice here the echo of the word ‘fingerprints’ and, by association, of criminality and detective work), and ‘smears’ (again, there is a double meaning: ‘smear’ also means to deliberately damage someone’s reputation, foreshadowing here the failure of Lilian and Frances to act when an innocent man is put on trial for Leonard’s murder). These traces are therefore incriminating in some way. Frances cannot escape them; they are ‘all she [can] see’; again, there is the sense here of the need to constantly maintain a fragile and unstable surface layer of meaning, through which the real account of events threatens to seep. The dirt and dust that cause Frances’ shame are not, at this point in the narrative, anything other than signs of neglect – but later, with re-reading, they are refigured as signs of her guilt; we see that they anticipate the bloodstains and other traces of Leonard’s body that Frances must somehow erase.

It is in terms of these bodily, physical traces that *The Paying Guests* ‘writes back’ to Waters’ earlier fiction, particularly *The Night Watch*. We have seen how Jessica Gildersleeve reads the dust and ash in the earlier novel through the lens of Irigaray’s concept of *déréliction*; I have

argued earlier in this chapter that the traces of women's bodies in *The Night Watch* reflect the way in which the histories of those who have occupied domestic spaces are associated with neglect and decay. In *The Paying Guests*, Waters writes about the traces of themselves that characters leave behind in similar language, but the purpose of these descriptions is different. Leonard's bodily traces are particularly inescapable and unwelcome – and particularly masculine:

Then there was the lavatory seat forever left in the upright position; there were the vivid yellow splashes and kinked wet gingerish hairs that appeared on the rim of the pan itself. Finally, on the dot of half past ten each night, there was the clatter of a spoon in a glass as Mr Barber mixed himself an indigestion powder, followed a few seconds later by the little report of his belch. (p. 35)

This is partly about Frances' resentment of the invasion of her private domestic space by the Barbers. It is also about the palimpsestic 'overwriting' of a female domestic space by a man and his male bodily functions. More importantly, however, there is – as I will show later in this chapter – a clear link between these physical traces and the potentially incriminating signs of Leonard's murder later in the novel. He leaves behind traces of himself here; later, Frances finds it impossible to entirely remove traces of his blood and hair after Lilian has killed him with the stand-ashtray. This motif is developed during the section of the novel in which Leonard and Lilian are away on holiday, and Frances realises she has been neglecting the housework and must attend to it immediately:

She ended up with a cloudy panful of fluff and tangled hairs: dark hairs from Lilian's head, reddish ones from Leonard's, brown from her own: the sight of them all muddled

up like that made her feel queasy. She didn't want them in the house, she decided, not even burning in the stove; instead she carried them all the way down the garden to the ash-heap. (p. 285)

The point here is that Lilian, Leonard and Frances do indeed end up 'muddled up like that', just as their hairs are; this comes to a head when Leonard confronts Lilian about her self-induced abortion, Frances blurts out the truth about her affair with Lilian, and Leonard is murdered (p. 334). The other key occasion when the three of them become 'all muddled up' is the night of the drunken game of snakes and ladders, after which Frances also feels 'queasier than ever' (p. 167). The image of tangling also links to the convoluted police investigation, made more convoluted still by Frances' concealment of the evidence. Most significantly, this episode anticipates the removal of Leonard's body after the murder: Frances does not want the tangled hairs in the house, so she removes them to the garden – which is precisely what she and Lilian do with Leonard's body.

The link between the housework and the clean-up operation after Leonard's death – and, more specifically, the idea that the former has been an elaborate form of preparation for the latter – is established with the immediate build-up to Leonard's murder. This is both the dramatic apex of the novel and the pivot point at which it whips off its disguise, performing a deft generic shift from simmering lesbian drama to classic detective fiction. Earlier in the novel, when walking in London, Frances observes that the city '[makes] one of its costume changes, like whipping off a cloak' (p. 40); this is precisely what the narrative does at this point. In this key episode, Lilian is pregnant with Leonard's child after their holiday, and, not wanting to keep the baby, has induced a miscarriage with pills bought by Frances from a chemist. Leonard arrives home unexpectedly just as Frances steps onto the landing with a bowl of 'grisly water'

turning red with Lilian's blood (p. 325). There is no time to take evasive action, and Leonard is only briefly taken in by Lilian's desperate explanation – that she is suffering a miscarriage. He insists that a doctor should be called. The two women know that they have committed a criminal offence:

Lilian had scrambled to her knees now, the blanket slithering from her, the hot water bottle falling plumply to the floor. Their gazes met over Leonard's shoulder and she gave Frances a small, urgent, warning shake of the head.

And Leonard turned back to her just as she did it. (p. 329)

Leonard has missed all the secret, intimate exchanges between his wife and Frances, but he catches this one. This sets off a chain of events which continues with his 'penny dropping' moment of understanding that Lilian has induced the miscarriage deliberately, and will shortly culminate, inevitably, in the revelation of the affair between Frances and Lilian:

He stood and watched [Lilian], his expression shifting. 'Just what the hell is going on here?' He waited. 'Frances? What's going on?' Then his face cleared, as he worked it out. He turned to his wife again. 'You've never –?' (p. 329)

Gildersleeve and Sulway contend that 'Frances' status as an outsider in her own family home becomes increasingly problematic as the novel progresses', reaching 'its apotheosis' when the abortion and the murder happen 'in the rooms that are no longer fully her own.'⁸⁵ This is particularly true of this moment in the narrative, when the issue of territory, of the contested and ambiguous ownership of domestic space in the house, becomes paramount. The space in

⁸⁵ Gildersleeve and Sulway, 'The Violent Pacifist', p. 80.

which this episode takes place used to belong to the Wrays, but is now occupied by the Barbers, whose status as both guests and invaders delegitimises Frances' presence in this particular part of her own home. What follows is partly the result of Leonard attempting to assert his masculine authority over this space: not believing she would take such drastic action were the baby his, he assumes she is having an affair with another man, and demands, with increasing anger and implied violence, that Lilian tells him who 'he' is (p. 333). This key episode picks up the motif of bodily traces, linking them with the domestic detritus and clutter we see in *The Night Watch* and the opening of *The Paying Guests*:

The bag's contents fell to the floor, to make a chaos of paper and coins, postage stamps, combs, lipsticks. He went roughly through them – he was looking for evidence [...] of Lilian's affair. Not finding anything there, he went around the room again, and spotted her work-basket: he seized that and tipped it up, too. The result was a shower of balls of wool, needle cases, paper patterns, cotton reels, scraps of material. (p. 333)

These domestic traces echo the 'cloudy panful of fluff and tangled hairs' from earlier in the novel (p. 285). The key difference here is that the traces are only Lilian's. Leonard's treatment and handling of them is violent, destructive and intractably masculine: because he '[goes] roughly through' the conspicuously feminine detritus of Lilian's handbag and '[tips] up' the correspondingly feminine contents of her 'work-basket', the effect is one of Frances' housework in reverse; he creates chaos out of order. Taken together with the mounting threat of actual rather than implied violence that defines this episode, it is hard not to see Leonard's violent assault of Lilian's feminine domestic traces as symbolic of his possible physical assault of Lilian's female body.⁸⁶ When the assault comes, however, it is Frances, not Lilian, who feels

⁸⁶ The connection is probably coincidental rather than deliberate, but there is nevertheless a strong echo here of a key scene in Tennessee Williams' play *A Streetcar Named Desire* (1947), in which Stanley violently assaults the

the force of Leonard's anger. It follows Frances' startling revelation that "*I'm the man, Leonard. [...] Lilian and I are lovers. We have been for months.*"

They went staggering together across the rug, through the chaos of wools, papers, knitting needles, pins: she could feel it all slithering about under the soles of her slippers. She heard Lilian crying, sobbing, pleading with him to let her go. But his grip was an intent and terrifying one, his arm still tight around her neck, the roughness of his sleeve like a burn on her throat. (p. 335)

It is significant that the domestic detritus motif makes a further appearance in the final seconds before Leonard is killed. The upended contents of Lilian's work-basket make both Leonard and Frances lose their footing; Leonard's violent scattering of Lilian's possessions means that Frances' physical struggle to resist his strength and anger is invested with an even greater degree of risk and danger. The 'chaos of wools, papers, knitting needles, pins' signifies the women's total loss of control and autonomy, and directly contributes to the moment just a few seconds later when Lilian kills Leonard with 'another sort of blow, with a different sound to it – a smack, but an oddly liquid one, like a cricket bat meeting a wet ball' (p. 336). She does this in a last, desperate attempt to free Frances from Leonard's 'intent and terrifying' grip, and she does it with the stand ashtray, another of the Barbers' bits of clutter that Frances so resents when they first move in and invade her domestic space. We have seen how Waters hides this clue in plain sight in the first chapter of the novel, when it appears, tellingly, at the end of a long list of the couple's kitsch domestic objects: 'bundle after bundle of bedding and rugs, a portable gramophone, a wicker birdcage, a bronze-effect ashtray on a marble stand...' (p. 6).

contents of Blanche's trunk in pursuit of the truth about her past, and, in particular, the unexplained loss of her family's plantation, Belle Reve. The trunk is clearly symbolic of a vulnerable female body being violated, and the play also has an interest in the domestic tensions triggered by the arrival of an outsider, and in the sometimes oppressive and sexually charged nature of enclosed domestic spaces.

When the novel moves into its second phase, and shifts from lesbian historical drama to crime fiction, we understand that Frances' housework has been an elaborate preparation for the literal and metaphorical 'cleaning up' of Leonard's death. The recurring images of dust and dirt and hair coalesce into the single, indelible image of Leonard's blood, a stain that will not go away, becoming both symbolic of the women's guilt and a very real and incriminating clue to the crime they have committed. The displacement of domestic detritus by Leonard's bloodstains is signalled before the women are even certain that he is dead, when Frances notices that he has 'lost all that blood, the yellow cushion [is] sodden with it; there [are] splashes of it all over the clutter of things on the carpet' (p. 340). When she sees 'a glass of water on the mantelpiece, and [tries] dashing a handful of it into his face', it merely 'mixes with the blood', pointing back to the bowl of water mixed with Lilian's blood that first triggered Leonard's suspicions, and making a direct link between the violence of Lilian's self-induced miscarriage and the violence of Leonard's death (p. 340).

The literal cleaning up begins after the women have moved Leonard's body to the lane next to the house. When they return and find the room 'just as they have left it, with its grisly chaotic floor', Frances burns the cushion in the fire, understanding that she 'must get rid of anything with blood on it' (p. 352). She then approaches the removal of the bloodstains with the same vigour with which she approached the household chores, making 'a mixture of salt and water, [...] and [getting] to work on the stains on the carpet' (p. 352-3). This is one stain removal task that is beyond Frances; she cannot accomplish it successfully, despite her experience and expertise:

The carpet would never come properly clean; there wasn't the time for it. She ought to use starch, or peroxide – it couldn't be helped. After five whole minutes of frantic soaking and dabbing, the spots had spread but lightened, become ghosts of themselves, haunting the gaudy pattern; she had to be satisfied with that. (p. 353)

This is perhaps one of the most surprising and incongruous intertextual references in Waters' fiction. Frances can't get rid of the stains, despite the 'frantic soaking and dabbing'; the marks are quite deliberately and pointedly described using the very precise and specific word 'spots'; there is the idea of ghosts and haunting. It is quite impossible not to think of *Macbeth*. The intertextual link is confirmed shortly afterwards with what appears to be a direct reference to Macbeth's famous exhortation to Banquo's ghost to 'Never shake thy gory locks at me' (III.iv.49): Frances finds 'a crust of blood on her forehead, where she must have raised gory fingers to put back a lock of hair' (p. 354). It is not clear whether the blood is Leonard's or Lilian's; throughout this section, the blood of a murder victim and a lost child mingle, just as they do in *Macbeth*, when the spilling of Duncan's blood by Macbeth echoes the blood of the child it is implied the Macbeths have lost.⁸⁷

The *Macbeth* connection is intriguing, and, given Waters' use of nineteenth- and twentieth-century intertexts elsewhere in her work, worthy of some consideration. I argue that it is connected to the brief moments in the novel when Frances engages in a bizarre kind of cross-dressing that is entirely different from the cross-dressing of Nancy and Kay in *Tipping the Velvet* and *The Night Watch* respectively. As Gildersleeve and Sulway argue:

⁸⁷ Lady Macbeth: 'I have given suck, and know/How tender 'tis to love the babe that milks me;/I would, while it was smiling in my face,/Have plucked my nipple from his boneless gums/And dashed the brains out, had I so sworn/As you have done to this' (I.vii.54-59).

[Frances] is literally costuming herself in the clothes of the men on whom she models her bravery: she wears Leonard's bowler hat as she drags his lifeless body into the alley behind the house, and the same behaviour is evident [...] when she must get rid of a mouse [...] and dons her brother's galoshes to carry it outside. Both examples constitute a monitoring and containment of the domestic sphere, protecting it from the invader, but requiring a performance of masculinity to do so.⁸⁸

Frances' fleeting performances of masculinity contribute to the palimpsestuous structure of the novel, both in that the bloodstains threaten to seep through the reinscription of her ineffective cleaning, and in the similarly spectral presence of Shakespeare's text in this section of the novel. Gildersleeve and Sulway's argument is suggestive of the involutedness of sexual and gender identity, and of the highly complex relationship between the different layers of Frances' subjectivity. A sustained queer identity is not available to Frances: she wears Leonard's bowler hat only because she cannot see how she and Lilian can possibly 'carry it, as well as him' (p. 346), and when she realises that she is still wearing it after they have dumped his body and returned to the house, 'her courage [fails] her', and she 'simply [flings] it into the void' (p. 351). This, at one level, underlines the futility of her attempts to fill the masculine roles vacated by her dead father and brothers, but I argue that the *Macbeth* episode is how the novel extends and develops this idea that Frances briefly inhabits a masculine identity when she needs to display qualities of courage and bravery, and how it signals that these attempts ultimately fail, as Lady Macbeth's do.

The sexual charge and tension in the Macbeths' relationship derives from Lady Macbeth's masculine qualities (her lust for power, her compelling powers of persuasion, her decisiveness,

⁸⁸ Gildersleeve and Sulway, 'The Violent Pacifist', pp. 76-77.

her ambition) and her husband's perceived feminine ones (his lily-livered cowardice, his indecisiveness, his vulnerability to persuasion by his wife). Frances exhibits masculine and feminine behaviours both in her pursuit of Lilian and in the aftermath of Leonard's killing, when she displays a stereotypically feminine sense of panic before taking 'masculine' control of the situation. It is also worth remembering that Leonard is killed by Lilian (a woman) in defence of Frances (another woman). As I explained in the introduction, much has been said elsewhere about Waters' uncoupling of the relationship between sex and gender, and of the influence of poststructuralist gender theorists – most notably Judith Butler – on her novels, particularly *Tipping the Velvet*. The references to *Macbeth* might appear in a much more serious and dramatic context, but there is nevertheless a sense of something similarly playful about them, particularly as they are so obviously deliberate, and so deftly woven into the narrative from such a revered and canonical text.

For Gildersleeve and Sulway, 'the invisibility of [Frances and Lilian's] relationship takes on a more complex and sinister function in the story' when the criminal investigation begins: '[the] inability of the police [...] to imagine a close friendship, let alone a romantic relationship, between Lilian and Frances, protects both women from becoming suspects.'⁸⁹ Initially, Frances and Lilian say very little, barely having to feign grief and shock upon receiving news of the discovery of Leonard's body, and giving noncommittal responses when asked if they know 'how Mr Barber had intended to spend the previous evening' (p. 376). As the narrative progresses, however, and it becomes necessary for Frances to repeat her fictitious account of the events of that day and night, her metaphorical 'cleaning up' begins to take on the same patterns of repetition, erasure and reinscription that we see in the housework. Again, the novel 'writes back' to an earlier incident, the significance of which only becomes clear with

⁸⁹ Gildersleeve and Sulway, 'The Violent Pacifist', p. 81.

hindsight. On the night of Lilian and Frances' first sexual encounter in the scullery, Leonard arrives home with a bloodied and broken nose after – he claims – being assaulted by a stranger (pp. 212-3). Only now do we learn that he did not file a police report in relation to the incident (because, as we learn much later, his attacker was the husband of the woman with whom he was having an affair). This begins to make things work in Frances' and Lilian's favour: the police believe 'there may be a link between that other assault and this one', putting further distance between the women and any notion of their culpability (p. 383). The link made by the police between the two assaults may appear to be part of the machinations of the plot, in that it leads directly to the police's theory that a male attacker with a motive against Leonard is responsible for his murder – but the degree of safety it gives the two women emboldens Frances, at which point we start to see that her approaches to cleaning the house and 'cleaning up' what really happened to Leonard are remarkably similar.

At first, Frances panics in response to initial police questioning. When she and Lilian are briefly left alone at the police station, they are 'too frightened to risk speech'; Frances wonders if 'someone might be out there, listening' and feels her heart 'pounding' (p. 379). After the police make the link between Leonard's murder and the earlier assault, however, Frances' manner with them changes markedly: she '[wills] herself to speak coolly' and begins to overwrite the real story of what has happened to Leonard (p. 385). Sergeant Heath explains that he is asking her about the nature of relations between Mr and Mrs Barber "because in a case like this, where a respectable man is assaulted and killed – " (p. 385). Frances cuts him off, reminding him, with a surprising boldness and confidence, that "You don't know that for sure, do you?" In the same conversation, when Sergeant Heath asks if any "curious letters [have arrived] at the house", Frances fires back with 'I'm not in the habit of examining my lodgers' post' (p. 385). We see here that the police have a tentative theory about what led to Leonard's killing,

and that Frances tries to alter, or at least cause them to call into question, its meaning. It is this ‘boldness [that] makes [her] actions less obvious to the outside observer’.⁹⁰ Here, Waters has fun with the palimpsestic conventions of detective fiction:

‘The blow was a vicious one, we do know that, and struck from behind, by a right-handed assailant, someone not overly tall. Death must have been almost instant: the bleeding seems to have stopped almost before he hit the ground. The instrument was blunt – a pipe or mallet, I’d say. We’ve been looking in gardens and storm-drains for it, without success so far. But we’ll turn it up, you mark my words; and it’ll lead us straight to our man.’ (p. 415)

The possibility that Frances and Lilian could be responsible never crosses Sergeant Heath’s mind. Sarah Dillon and Claire Gorrara observe that detective fiction is characterised by a palimpsestic narrative structure in which the detective must erase the surface story of the investigation in order to allow the true story of the crime to seep through.⁹¹ What happens instead, in a queering of this structure, is that Sergeant Heath constructs *his own* false story to cover up the real one. It is barely necessary for Frances to do it for him. This is achieved through an unmistakable intertextual link to Roald Dahl’s darkly comic short story *Lamb to the Slaughter*, in which the investigating officers’ final words closely echo those of Sergeant Heath in *The Paying Guests*:

⁹⁰ Lucy Daniel, ‘The Paying Guests by Sarah Waters, review: eerie, virtuoso writing’, *The Telegraph*, 30th August 2014
<<https://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/books/bookreviews/11061441/The-Paying-Guests-by-Sarah-Waters-review-eerie-virtuoso-writing.html>>
[accessed 12th May 2017].

⁹¹ Claire Gorrara, ‘Figuring Memory as a Palimpsest: Rereading Cultural Memories of Jewish Persecution on French Crime Fiction about the Second World War’, in *Rewriting Wrongs: French Crime Fiction and the Palimpsest*, ed. by Angela Kimyongür and Amy Wigelsworth (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2014), p. 17.

‘That’s a hell of a big club the guy must’ve used to hit poor Patrick,’ one of them was saying. ‘The doc says his skull was all smashed to pieces just like from a sledgehammer.’”

‘That’s why it ought to be easy to find.’

‘Exactly what I say.’

‘Whoever done it, they’re not going to be carrying a thing like that around with them longer than they need.’

One of them belched.

‘Personally, I think it’s right here on the premises.’

‘Probably right under our very noses. What do you think, Jack?’

And in the other room, Mary Maloney began to giggle. (p. 368)

The police officers’ language is more rough and ready than the Standard English of Sergeant Heath, but the arrogance and complacency are the same. The reason Mary Maloney is ‘giggling’ is because, like Lilian, she has murdered her husband by hitting him on the head from behind with a blunt instrument – in this case, a frozen leg of lamb. She cooks and serves the lamb to the police officers who call at the house after her feigned ‘discovery’ of the body, thus ensuring their collusion in the destruction of the evidence. Mary Maloney, a conventional 1950s housewife accustomed to cleaning up after her husband, effects an ingenious clearing up of the evidence here. As in *The Paying Guests*, we have male police officers who do not even begin to suspect that a woman could be responsible – they automatically assume they are looking for a male suspect, and never demonstrate any ability to think laterally or beyond the scope of their previous experience. This pattern of intertextual references – *Macbeth*, *Lamb to the Slaughter* – is part of the palimpsestuous structure of *The Paying Guests*. It is how we come to understand that Frances’ housework is of considerable significance to the novel as a whole.

It is so much more than just a marker of her complex social class position, or her sexual frustration: it is how the novel links female domestic labour to ideas elsewhere in literature about how women *are* capable of violence, how a male hegemonic culture has historically had difficulty accepting this, and the nature of female guilt and shame. It connects Frances' shame as a queer woman (which, as we have previously seen, is forced on her by her mother) to her shame in terms of her complicity in Lilian's self-induced abortion, and Leonard's murder. More than anything else, it reveals how, like a clean house, and the story she constructs for the police, Frances' lesbian identity – and, by extension, queer history itself – is not stable. It must be maintained, relentlessly and painstakingly, if it is to have any legitimacy or authority at all. This becomes particularly apparent when Frances finds herself having to explain things not just to the police, but to friends, neighbours and members of Leonard's family – one of whom, Mrs Playfair, a neighbour and friend of Frances' mother, is the archetype of the interfering, nosy neighbour.

The parallels between the housework and Frances' management of the police investigation emerge clearly when Mrs Playfair visits the Wray household one afternoon. She is an incorrigible gossip, a curtain-twitcher, visibly 'excited' when Frances tells her (false) story of Leonard's murder (p. 436). The need for rehearsal and repetition is made explicit when Frances '[realises] that here [is] an opportunity to tell the story of the murder as the police had begun to construct it – to fix it more firmly in her mind' (p. 436). This, in a work of historical fiction rich in period detail, draws our attention to the constructedness of history, and the inevitable falsehoods and embellishments that characterise historical accounts. Frances' 'careful, thorough account of the events of the past few days' works to draw both Mrs Playfair and her mother into her construction of a false story, securing their collusion in deflecting attention away from what really happened (p. 436). Frances' mother asks Mrs Playfair if she ““can really

believe, as Inspector Kemp seems to think, that someone set out, purposely, to kill him? Someone with some sort of grudge against him?” (p. 436). Mrs Playfair responds with “‘I’m not sure I do believe it. There seems no evidence, for one thing. The attacker was clearly one of those louts one sees hanging about on the street corners!’” (p. 436). Here we have two theories about Leonard’s death, one acceptable to the police, and one to those who knew Leonard personally; neither of them is close to the truth about what actually happened. As Mrs Playfair ‘[goes] on like this, laying down certainty after certainty’ she begins to sound, to Frances, ‘oddly, in her confidence, like the inspector himself, so that Frances [...] [begins] to feel a return of the mild elation she had felt on Sunday while listening to him’ (p. 437). The idea of the palimpsest as a structure that *obscures* meaning is there in the layers – the ‘certainty after certainty’ – that accumulate around Mrs Playfair’s account of what she believes the circumstances of Leonard’s death to be; the more layers she ‘lays down’, the more the truth recedes.

The housework makes a final significant appearance shortly before the trial of Spencer Ward, the fiancé of the woman with whom Leonard was having an affair. Ward is guilty only of attacking Leonard on the night he came home with a bloody nose, and Frances and Lilian fear that an innocent man is about to be convicted of the crime they committed. Frances ‘[gives] herself over to chores, wanting to put the house in order before the trial [begins]’, but she realises that this time – for the first time – she is fighting ‘a losing battle’:

The house had begun to fall apart. The geyser shrieked as it burned. Paint was peeling from window frames and revealing them to be rotten. The scullery roof had sprung a leak; she put down a bowl to catch the drips, but the rainwater spread and darkened [...]

It was just as if the house were suddenly as weary as she was. Or as if it could sense that the jig was up: that their little contract was about to expire. (p. 550)

We have seen already that the novel shifts from lesbian drama to detective fiction at its halfway point. Here, it becomes, just for this paragraph, *The Little Stranger*. This means that the signs of damage and neglect are no longer just a matter of dust collecting in corners and grime on floorboards; they are much more violent, much more suggestive of an inevitable and accelerating *collapse*, rather than a mere decay, that cannot be held at bay. In both novels, the house is injured. In *The Little Stranger*, these injuries reflect the physical and psychological damage that the Ayres family have suffered; in *The Paying Guests*, the injuries to the house are symbolic of a number of things: the wound to Leonard's head, Lilian's self-induced abortion, the psychological injuries suffered by both women in the aftermath of Leonard's murder, and the damage to their relationship. In each novel, there are linguistically similar references to water damage: in *The Little Stranger*, Caroline Ayres inspects a blocked drainpipe and '[can] see how very badly the water [has] seeped'; she finds 'minor leaks in two of the rooms' and a 'decorative ceiling so bloated with water it actually sagged' (p. 293). The geyser in this passage from *The Paying Guests*, morphed by the verb 'shrieking' into some kind of demented creature that might give away the women's secret, recalls the noises – the tapping, knocking, whispering, screaming – that various objects make in *The Little Stranger*. *The Paying Guests* therefore 'writes back' to the earlier novel at the moment at which Frances feels that she is losing control. As Ann Heilmann argues:

Waters plays with our recognition of the interpretative instabilities raised by her synthesis of neo-Victorian and neo-forties genres. In neo-Victorianism too, the

hereditary manor house is invested with metaphorical significance, standing as it does for contemporary literature's self-construction through Victorian reference points.⁹²

Heilmann is writing about *The Little Stranger* here, but this moment in *The Paying Guests* when the earlier novel reappears produces its own 'interpretative instabilities'. The Wrays' house dates from the Regency period, not the Victorian one, but, as I have explored in this chapter, its 1922 fictive present is haunted by the Victorian period through the presence of Frances' mother, and through the connection the novel establishes between the postwar decline of the middle and upper classes and domestic decay. *The Paying Guests* is not constructed around 'neo-Victorian reference points' in the way that *The Little Stranger* is, but it can be argued that the more recent novel further expands the definition of neo-Victorianism, in that Mrs Wray's policing of Frances' friendships and relationships reflects the persistent influence not just of Victorian literary culture, but also of Victorian sexual and gender politics.

The novel ends on an ambiguous note: Spencer Ward is found not guilty of Leonard's murder, much to Frances' relief, and the case remains unsolved. Frances and Lilian allow themselves to wonder if there might be a future for them, despite what has happened:

Would it be alright, wondered Frances, if they were to allow themselves to be happy? Wouldn't it be a sort of insult to all of those others who had been harmed? Or oughtn't they to do all they could – didn't they almost have a duty – to make one small brave thing happen at last?

⁹² Heilmann, 'Specters of the Victorian', p. 41.

She didn't know. She couldn't think of it. Her mind wouldn't reach that far. [...]

But for now there was this, and it was enough, and it was more than they could have hoped for [...] (p. 595)

These are the final words of the novel. They can be read as an intervention into current debates around queer history, one that offers a compromise between the optimism of gay pride discourses and Heather Love's call to '[attend] to specific histories of homophobic exclusion and violence.'⁹³ The passage as a whole accepts her argument that queer identity 'cannot be uncoupled from violence, suffering, and loss', but underlines the tension inherent in adopting this position: narratives of queer shame are acknowledged ('Wouldn't it be a sort of insult to all those who had been harmed?'), but Love's insistence on 'clinging to ruined identities and to histories of injury' is called into question.⁹⁴ The novel suggests here that awareness of such identities and histories inhibits the development of a queer identity in the present that *can* 'allow [itself] to be happy' and 'make one small brave thing happen at last'. Thus the ending offers a way of reconciling this contradiction, so that it seems possible to both acknowledge a history of shame and inhabit a positive queer identity in the present. As with so much else in Waters' fiction – and, indeed, in queer history itself – only a qualified, contingent optimism is possible, and ultimately Frances does not answer her own questions about what might be possible for her and Lilian: they have 'this, and it [is] enough, and more than they could have hoped for'. It is this context that we can apprehend Waters' shunning of 'the fashionable metropolitan Bohemia of the Roaring Twenties' in favour of 'the earlier part of the decade, sombre and grief-stricken.'⁹⁵ Some queer lives and experiences can be recovered and recuperated, and some are destined to remain lost in the shadows of history.

⁹³ Love, *Feeling Backward*, p. 28.

⁹⁴ Love, *Feeling Backward*, p. 30.

⁹⁵ Daniel, *The Paying Guests* review.

Queer shame and lesbian postmemory in *The Night Watch*

Earlier in this chapter, I argued that Waters' twentieth-century-set novels explore the relationship between queer subjects in the past and present, and that this relationship is one characterised by the kind of ambiguity and contradiction we see in the ending of *The Paying Guests*. In all three novels, this sense of ambiguity and contradiction results from the simultaneity of past and present: the novels engage with current queer theoretical debates just as much as they speak to particular historical moments, and, in doing so, explore how modern queer subjectivities feel both distant from and close to their historical counterparts. In arguing that we can establish a link here between queer shame and queer postmemory, I now want to turn to *The Night Watch*, a novel that anticipates *The Paying Guests*' palimpsest imagery in two particular ways. The most obvious these is concerned with the idea of the ruin, and with the simultaneous exposure of layers of time, history and memory:

'An incendiary will land on a roof: it might burn through, quite neatly, from one floor to the next; you can stand in the basement and look at the sky; I find damage like that more miserable, somehow, than if a house has been blasted to bits: it's like a life with cancer in it.' (p. 225)

In this example of the damaged palimpsest, we see that the simultaneous exposure of layers has *not* happened naturally over time through the chemical processes that form a palimpsestic structure: it has happened through force, through deliberate action. There are clear parallels with the chipped paint on the bandstand rail as a metaphor for Leonard and Lilian's marriage in *The Paying Guests*. Here, the palimpsest metaphor is linked to the idea of sudden, violent

damage. This is damage of a more clinical and ruthless kind than that caused to the bandstand rail – the house has been ‘[burned] through, ‘quite neatly’ – but there is the same idea of simultaneous exposure of different layers of time and history. The process by which these layers are exposed is, again, figured in terms of illness and injury – just as each layer of chipped paint represents a ‘quarrel’ or ‘unkindness’ in Leonard and Lilian’s marriage, so the damaged house becomes ‘a life with cancer in it’. This is perhaps a rather too extreme way of explaining the effect of the knowledge of historical abjection on modern queer subjectivities, but I want to argue here that the damaged palimpsest in *The Night Watch* does make possible a reading of the novel in which a connection can be made between queer shame and queer postmemory.

As we have seen, *The Night Watch* shares with *The Paying Guests* a preoccupation with domestic detritus – dust, ash, clutter. Jessica Gildersleeve reads this in terms of the novel’s anxiety about ‘the denial of woman-identified relationships in contemporary culture’, understanding this ‘absence of connections between women’ as a kind of domestic *déréliction* in Irigaray’s terms.⁹⁶ For Adele Jones, the novel’s concern with domestic decay and neglect centres on Kay as the inhabitant of the only house left standing in the terrace, in which ‘the clinker in the fireplace [...] gently [collapses], the glass in the window has been replaced with lino, the bedspread is ‘balding’, and the walls are ‘empty and featureless’ (p. 4). Jones argues that Kay ‘represents the point at which the boundaries between masculinity and femininity, heterosexuality and Other, threaten to collapse’; thus the ‘undomestic, *unheimlich* state of the house [...] undermines the gendered nature of nature of the structures that reinforce it, in this case the identification of domesticity with femininity.’⁹⁷ The contrast between Kay’s shabby room and her smart clothing works to further undermine the association between domestic

⁹⁶ Gildersleeve, ‘Anxious Affinities’, p. 82.

⁹⁷ Jones, ‘Disrupting the Continuum’, p. 34.

space and the feminine subject: her *masculine* clothes are ‘very neat’, with ‘nicely darned socks’ and ‘some tailored slacks’; she devotes considerable time and care to polishing her shoes, putting cufflinks in her shirt, and brushing her hair (p. 4-5). The wartime context means that her clothes might be worn or damaged, but, *unlike* the room itself, they are not neglected – any damage has been carefully repaired. Thus, rather than any kind of affinity or continuity between domesticity and femininity, there is instead a destabilising of the relationship between them. When Kay is getting dressed, she ‘[changes] her shirt to a cleaner one, a shirt with a soft white collar she could leave open at the throat, as a woman might’ (p. 4). She is assigned a female name and a female pronoun, but both are called into question. Does the phrase ‘as a woman might’ mean that she is not a woman, or that she is, so therefore on this occasion she is making an exception by dressing as women do? Should the stress fall on the word ‘woman’ or on the word ‘might’? Kay’s status as a gendered subject remains ambiguous.

Kay’s ambiguous, unstable subjectivity can be understood in terms of both lesbian postmemory and queer shame. As we have seen, ‘postmemory’ is the term coined by Marianne Hirsch to describe the inherited ‘memories’ of the children of Holocaust survivors; it offers a way of conceptualising the way that this ‘second generation’ can experience memories of trauma even when they have no direct experience of the trauma itself. In her work on lesbian postmemory in *The Night Watch*, Natasha Alden makes the concept specific to lesbian history, arguing that:

[L]esbians writing historical fiction now are in effect a ‘second generation’, inheriting not the trauma of a preceding generation but the dual trauma of the relative silence where lesbian history might, perhaps, have been, and of the knowledge of the oppression of individuals. This ‘second generation’ seeks to reinscribe its place in a

narrative that has elided them, but that also demonstrates the further potential of postmemory, beyond the literal second generation.⁹⁸

Alden thus understands postmemory in *The Night Watch* in terms of Waters' engagement with lesbian history, and with her use of historical source material. The idea of the literal second generation *is* there – Waters and her contemporaries are a 'second generation' of lesbian fiction writers – but Alden goes beyond this, splintering the 'second generation' into two parts. Firstly, lesbian writers of historical fiction do not inherit 'the trauma of a preceding generation' in the way that the children of Holocaust survivors do, simply because so much of lesbian history is hidden and unknown – the 'relative silence'. Secondly, in this gap where so much has not been written down and recorded and therefore cannot be known, there is only 'the knowledge of the oppression of individuals.' This is lesbian postmemory. It is theoretically not merely possible, but *necessary*, to link lesbian postmemory and queer shame together: this 'knowledge of the oppression of individuals' is at the heart of Heather Love's notion of 'feeling backward', of the importance of acknowledging a history of abjection and suffering as part of queer subjectivity.

In *The Night Watch*, we see lesbian postmemory and queer shame coming together in the temporal structure of the novel, and in Kay's apparently purposeless walking. Adele Jones argues that the novel's backwards structure '[undoes] the space/time dichotomy': none of the characters are able to move forwards, and the very idea of a future is foreclosed.⁹⁹ This is not to say that the narrative proceeds in a backwards direction. As I have explained, the three sections may appear in reverse order, but within each section the narrative moves forward. This

⁹⁸ Alden, *Reading Behind the Lines*, p. 180.

⁹⁹ Jones, 'Disrupting the Continuum', p. 34.

produces a strange effect that is like a kind of shunting: both characters and reader move backwards even as they move forward; as the first section (1947) reaches its end, we also reach the end of the story, and feel that we have moved forwards – but are then taken back to 1944. The same effect is felt at the point at which this section concludes and the 1941 section begins. In other words, the temporal structure of the novel goes forwards as well as in reverse, which is to say that it does not go anywhere: if it did truly go backwards, then ‘backwards’ does at least suggest a direction or destination, and there are no directions or destinations in *The Night Watch*. Kay’s walking, something she does often in the opening section, mirrors what the novel does structurally:

But she wouldn’t turn back. She had, as it were, her own brushed hair to live up to; her polished shoes, her cuff-links. She went down the steps and started to walk. She stepped like a person who knew exactly why they were going – though the fact was, she had nothing to do, and no one to visit, no one to see. (p. 6)

Kay’s walking has an *impression* of purpose, but it does not actually have one; within each section of the novel, there is a false impression of things moving forward, and then the narrative goes backwards. Lesbian postmemory is about the dual trauma of the silence of lesbian history and the knowledge of a history of suffering. This is what makes constructing a viable lesbian identity and coherent lesbian history – the ‘moving forwards’, in other words, of lesbian identity and history – so difficult. Queer shame asks that in embracing the idea of looking backwards, we acknowledge a history of trauma, and understand that to deny shame is to deny the suffering of the first generation to which all second-generation queer and lesbian subjectivities are connected.

Conclusion

Waters' twentieth-century-set novels reveal the differences between the young writer and the middle-aged writer. In the introduction, I examined her academic work co-authored with Laura Doan. This research was published in 2000, when Waters would have been writing *Fingersmith* (published in 2002), and was therefore approaching the point in her career at which she would make the transition to the twentieth century (*The Night Watch* was published in 2006, but, given the time Waters spends researching her novels, would have been started a few years earlier). I also explained in the introduction that I use the term 'historiographic intervention' to describe Waters' novels, because I share de Groot's perspective that they develop the project of retrospection she sets out in 'Making up lost time'.¹⁰⁰ How, then, does this historiographic project develop in the writing of her later novels? In Chapter 2 and Chapter 4, I focus on her neo-Victorian fiction, which is, to varying degrees, more playful, and more obviously tied to its late 1990s/early 2000s point of inception – a period Waters has described as 'an electric time to be gay'.¹⁰¹ Her more recent novels can be understood as exemplifying how her approach to history has developed since writing the neo-Victorian novels: in *The Night Watch*, *The Little Stranger* and *The Paying Guests* there is the sense that Waters is taking into account what has happened since the late 1990s. In Waters' terms, this was a period in which 'there was a lot to be angry about, but also a lot to celebrate and relish' and 'lesbian and gay culture [had] an energy and a political charge'.¹⁰² In the same article, Waters says that the lifespan of the novel coincides precisely with 'enormous changes in the lives of British gay and lesbian people, who now have equal [civil] rights [...] and a mainstream cultural presence'.¹⁰³ What *The Paying*

¹⁰⁰ Jerome de Groot, "'Something New and a Bit Startling': Sarah Waters and the Historical Novel" in *Sarah Waters: Contemporary Critical Perspectives*, ed. by Kaye Mitchell (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), p. 58.

¹⁰¹ Sarah Waters, 'It was an electric time to be gay', p. 37.

¹⁰² Waters, 'It was an electric time to be gay: twenty years of *Tipping the Velvet*', *The Guardian Review*, 20th January 2018, p. 37.

¹⁰³ Waters, 'It was an electric time to be gay', p. 38.

Guests in particular shows us is that these gains are not set in stone: they are more fragile than we might think, and can be undone. This can be illustrated through a comparison between the echoes of Judith Butler in *Tipping the Velvet*, Waters' first novel, and in *The Paying Guests*, her most recent. In the former, the idea that gender is stable is parodied through the costume changes that accompany the shifts in Nancy's sexual and gender identity, but in the latter, the sense of something fragile being sustained through iterative action is present only in Frances' constant housework.

In Waters' neo-Victorian fiction, as I will show in later chapters, we see her engagement with 'the very patchiness of lesbian history' and how this 'incites the lesbian historical novelist to pinch, to appropriate, to make stuff up'.¹⁰⁴ Waters is writing specifically about *Tipping the Velvet* here, and certainly *Affinity* (1999) and *Fingersmith* are less playful, but all three novels share the approach to lesbian history she describes here.¹⁰⁵ In my study of *The Night Watch*, *The Little Stranger* and *The Paying Guests*, I draw on queer shame and lesbian postmemory precisely because these concepts provide a way to complicate positive responses to the gains made for British gay and lesbian people in the last twenty years. As Marianne Hirsch explains, the 'post' in postmemory describes 'more than a temporal delay, more than a location in an aftermath', and implies the same paradoxical proximity to and distance from what has gone before that we see in terms like 'poststructuralism' and 'postmodernism'.¹⁰⁶ All these things are useful in conceptualising the relationship between queer subjects in the present and in the past in Waters' historical fiction. Her twentieth-century-set novels all deal with a return to restrictive, regressive gender and sexual politics in a post-war context. We might say there are parallels with the present, in that a greater acceptance of gay and lesbian lives and cultures has

¹⁰⁴ Waters, 'It was an electric time to be gay', p. 38.

¹⁰⁵ Sarah Waters, *Affinity* (London: Virago, 2002).

¹⁰⁶ Hirsch, *The Generation of Postmemory*, p. 5.

been accompanied by the continued presence of hostile forces. What my conceptualisation of the damaged palimpsest allows us to apprehend is that the process of recovering the history of suffering that Love describes might also involve further history and suffering. This is what accrues in the sedimentation of the damaged palimpsest: the knowledge of a history of trauma and suffering, and a warning of the potential for continued suffering in the present.

Chapter 2: *Fingersmith*: Henry Spencer Ashbee's archive and the legitimacy of female authorship

Introduction

Waters' third novel *Fingersmith* (2002) is deeply preoccupied with the textuality of history – writing, reading, books, archives.¹ This idea that history is sedimented in written texts is explored through Waters' representation of what appears to be the most intractably masculine and patriarchal of texts: Henry Spencer Ashbee's formidably weighty nineteenth-century bibliography of pornography. As I explained in the introduction, the Ashbee archive has been overlooked in responses to the novel. One of the particular implications of this is that critics are unaware that the catalogued texts span three centuries, which means that the way *Fingersmith* implicates patriarchal authorial and bibliographic methods in the oppression of women *throughout* history, rather than at a particular point in the past, is also missed.² Drawing on my original archival research, I re-read the novel through the palimpsest metaphor, revealing how palimpsestic patterns of repetition, imitation and reproduction surface in relation to several of *Fingersmith*'s concerns: female reading and writing practices, the objectification and commodification of women in history, the way in which women are made complicit in their own and each other's subordination. Ultimately, my work with Ashbee's texts leads me to conclude that the novel is sceptical about the possibility of establishing a legitimate lesbian literary tradition in the context of a history of oppression.

¹ Sarah Waters, *Fingersmith* (London: Virago, 2003).

² Waters provides a publication date for the Ashbee archive in the *Fingersmith* acknowledgements, but she does not mention that his texts date back to the sixteenth century.

The first part of *Fingersmith* is narrated by Sue, a petty thief – or ‘fingersmith’ in nineteenth-century South London slang. The thieves’ den in which Sue is raised is presided over by Mrs Sucksby, who, together with fellow criminal conspirator Gentleman, persuades Sue to take part in an elaborate plot to defraud wealthy heiress Maud Lilly of her inheritance. Sue will go to Briar, the large country house where Maud lives with her uncle, Christopher Lilly, to work as Maud’s maid. According to Gentleman’s plan, Sue will then persuade Maud to elope with him, at which point he will have Maud committed to a mental asylum so that he can claim her fortune for himself. When Sue arrives at Briar, Maud is innocent, unknowing, apparently untutored in the ways of the world. She is kept occupied by her secretarial work for her uncle, who is working on a substantial but unspecified academic project in his vast library. The two young women develop a close friendship which becomes a romantic affair, but the scheme goes according to plan until the moment when Sue, Maud and Gentleman arrive at the asylum in a carriage. In an extraordinary twist, Maud pretends to be the maid to make Sue appear as though she is the one who is mad, and it is Sue who is committed to the asylum. The second part of the novel relates the same events as the first, this time from the perspective of Maud. Far from being the wide-eyed ingenue Sue believed her to be, Maud was raised by the nurses in the asylum where her mother was incarcerated, and the project her uncle is working on – the project to which she is enslaved, and through which she is abused – involves compiling a vast bibliography of pornography. After Gentleman has committed Sue to the asylum, he takes Maud to Mrs Sucksby’s Lant Street thieves’ den – not, as he had promised her, to a grand house in Chelsea. While she is imprisoned there, we learn, via an extraordinarily arcane inheritance sub-plot engineered by Mrs Sucksby, that Maud is in fact Mrs Sucksby’s daughter. The final third of the novel resumes Sue’s story: she escapes from the asylum and is reunited with Maud in what used to be Christopher Lilly’s library, where Maud is now making a living writing her own pornographic texts. The novel ends with Maud using the words she has written to teach

Sue how to be ‘both sexually and textually literate.’³ There has been much debate around this ending in responses to *Fingersmith*, as I consider in the next section of this chapter: some critics argue that Maud’s authorship underlines the legitimacy of a female or lesbian literary tradition, and points to the emancipatory potential of pornography that is written by and for women; others contend that the ending is much more ambiguous and uncertain.

Critical contexts: Responses to *Fingersmith*; Waters’ academic work on lesbian and gay historical fiction

Fingersmith both depends upon and critiques the concepts of the lesbian reader and the lesbian writer – concepts that, as Paulina Palmer points out, have come into existence only recently, and only because of the combined efforts of lesbian writers and lesbian readers themselves.⁴ The implication here that ‘lesbian writer’ and ‘lesbian reader’ are inherently unstable categories underscores Sarah Gamble’s assertion that *Fingersmith* calls into question reading as a means of acquiring authentic knowledge, particularly in the way that Waters’ ‘propensity for narrative trickery’ forces the reader to call into question everything she has read in the first half of the novel.⁵ Drawing on Gayle Rubin’s *The Traffic in Women*, Kathleen Miller considers how *Fingersmith* reminds us of the extent to which the natural capacities of reading and writing to educate, entertain and liberate can be appropriated and corrupted, so that the production, consumption and transmission of texts becomes highly ideologically charged.⁶ For Lucie

³ Kathleen Miller, ‘Sarah Waters’ *Fingersmith*: Leaving Women’s Fingerprints on Victorian Pornography’ *Nineteenth-Century Gender Studies* 4 (2008) <<http://www.ncgsjournal.com/issue41/miller.htm>> [accessed 9th August 2014].

⁴ Paulina Palmer, “‘She began to show me the words she had written, one by one’: Lesbian Reading and Writing Practices in the Fiction of Sarah Waters’, *Women: A Cultural Review* 19 (2008), p. 70.

⁵ Sarah Gamble, “‘I know everything. I know nothing’: (Re)Reading *Fingersmith*’s Deceptive Doubles’ in *Sarah Waters: Contemporary Critical Perspectives*, ed. by Kaye Mitchell (London: Bloomsbury, 2016), p. 43.

⁶ Miller, ‘Leaving Women’s Fingerprints’.

Armitt, the consequences of this are inevitable: reading and writing are the means by which the imprisonment of both Maud and Sue is secured.⁷

The issue of how to rationalise the patterns of mutual betrayal, exploitation and oppression that characterise Waters' representation of familial, platonic and romantic relationships between women is a significant point of contention in responses to the novel. Mari-Hughes Edwards says of *Affinity* (1999) that Waters 'suggests [...] that women continue to be most at risk when they do nothing to challenge a system determined to erode their capacity to care for one another', but the same could be said of *Fingersmith*.⁸ The widespread acknowledgement – even in queer readings of Waters' work – that women and lesbians remain her central concern reveals that critics remain in something of a quandary about the deceitfulness, duplicity, and sometimes 'downright unpleasant[ness]' of her female characters.⁹ Claire O'Callaghan's dual feminist/queer perspective offers a different argument entirely: the deception practised by Maud and Sue can be seen as a metaphor for the fluidity of queer desire.¹⁰ This cannot, however, fully account for the dramatic and violent consequences – for both women – of their mutual deception. Nadine Müller offers the compelling argument that the attempts of Mrs Sucksby and Marianne Lilly to subvert patriarchal systems of inheritance and exchange only serve to underline how entrenched these systems are.¹¹ The problem with this perspective is that if we argue that patriarchy somehow seeks and secures the complicity of women in their own and each other's oppression, then we deny women all agency. For Cora Kaplan, this

⁷ Lucie Armitt, *Twentieth-Century Gothic* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2010), pp. 136-7.

⁸ Sarah Waters, *Affinity* (London: Virago, 2002); Mari Hughes-Edwards, "'Better a prison...than a madhouse!'" Incarceration and the Neo-Victorian Fictions of Sarah Waters' in Jones and O'Callaghan (2016), p. 142.

⁹ Stefania Ciocia, 'Queer and Verdant: The Textual Politics of Sarah Waters' Neo-Victorian Novels', *Literary London: Interdisciplinary Studies in the Representation of London* 5 (2007)

<<http://www.literarylondon.org/london-journal/september2007/ciocia.html>> [accessed 21st July 2014].

¹⁰ Claire O'Callaghan, 'The equivocal symbolism of pearls in the novels of Sarah Waters', *Contemporary Women's Writing*, 6 (2012), p. 24.

¹¹ Nadine Müller, 'Not My Mother's Daughter: Matrilinealism, Third-Wave Feminism and Neo-Victorian Fiction', *Neo-Victorian Studies* 2 (2009-10), p. 119.

‘undertow of same-sex betrayal and sadism’ is not simply a result of women’s oppression by men, the state, or Victorian patriarchy; hierarchies of class and gender are also implicated.¹² There is, therefore, an almost anti-feminist undercurrent of persistent reluctance in these responses to acknowledge the human capacity of women to be horrible to one another, without any particularly complex reason or motivation. The belief that all women are – or should be – nice or kind or good to others at all times is surely one of the means by which their subordinate position is perpetuated, yet the idea persists that if a feminist writer represents women as being capable of deceit or cruelty, then there must be some explanation other than that some women just *are* deceitful or cruel. Essentially, Waters is concerned with representing her female characters as real, flawed, imperfect people, rather than just women, with all the capacity for both compassion *and* cruelty that this implies.

Waters implies in *Fingersmith* that what Christopher Lilly does with his books – collecting, cataloguing, fetishising, valuing their status as physical artefacts over their content – is what has been done to the female body throughout history. There is a clearly established strand in critical responses to the novel that explores and debates this connection between the female body and the body of the book. For Kathleen Miller, there is a ‘conflict between the human body of the writer/reader and the ‘body’ of the physical book [that] resides at the heart of Waters’ novel’.¹³ Maud has the clear sense that she is, like the pornographic books she must read and handle, ‘ticketed, and noted and shelved’ (p. 218); Kaye Mitchell observes that Maud’s enslavement by Lilly’s archive is such that she finds it difficult to understand her relationship with Sue outside the terms imposed by the pornography she has read, and fears that her same-sex desire is no more meaningful or authentic than the books on her uncle’s

¹² Kaplan, Cora, ‘Fingersmith’s Coda: Feminism and Victorian Studies’, *Journal of Victorian Culture*, 13 (2008), p. 51.

¹³ Miller, ‘Leaving Women’s Fingerprints’.

shelves.¹⁴ It thus becomes clear that the relationship between the body and the book is more than just a connection: it is the objectification of the former by means of the latter, so that '[t]he tangible description of Maud's desire and its inclusion in her uncle's collection works to delegitimize her desire and undermine the intensity of her feelings.'¹⁵ In this sense, we see that Christopher Lilly does not suppress or deny Maud's sexuality; he appropriates it for his own ends and purposes. This means we do not necessarily deny women agency and position them as passive victims if we argue that they are made into the agents of their own oppression: the point is that Maud *does* exercise agency, but it is appropriated by her uncle – and, by extension, by the masculine bibliographic and pornographic tradition.

When the palimpsest metaphor is applied to *Fingersmith's* ideas about the treatment of women throughout history, we understand that oppression, abuse and enslavement do not have a clear origin; to say this would be to imply that they will also have an end point. What the palimpsest allows us to apprehend is that these processes are infinite and cyclical, just as the palimpsest is constructed within and across time.¹⁶ As Sarah Dillon points out, there is no relationship, in terms of the content of the writing, between one layer of the palimpsest and the next.¹⁷ My conceptualisation therefore manipulates, rather than rigidly adheres to, the palimpsest metaphor, in that images of repetition, imitation, reinscription and reproduction surface throughout *Fingersmith*, and there *is* some kind of relationship between the different layers. The image of the palimpsest in *Fingersmith* has almost escaped critical scrutiny, so that Kaye Mitchell is alone among scholars in explicitly framing Maud's training as her uncle's amanuensis, and the revealing of the truth about his archive, in these terms:

¹⁴ Kaye Mitchell, "'That library of uncatalogued pleasure': Queerness, Desire and the Archive in Contemporary Gay Fiction', in *Libraries, Literatures and Archives*, ed. by Kaye Mitchell (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), p. 176.

¹⁵ Mitchell, 'That library of uncatalogued pleasure', p. 177.

¹⁶ Sarah Dillon, *The Palimpsest: Literature, Criticism, Theory* (London: Continuum, 2007), p. 12.

¹⁷ Dillon, *The Palimpsest*, p. 47.

The archive here is associated with darkness, obscurity, shadows and secrecy – and with masculine authority and desire. It undergoes a shift during the narrative, however, so that it is ultimately revealed to the light.¹⁸

Here, Mitchell raises all sorts of questions about the nature of historical ‘truth’, particularly where the scope, aims and motivations of Waters’ historiographic intervention are concerned. Mitchell implies that Lilly’s archive is overlaid with and thus protected by a layer of secrecy, and that this process of protection and concealment is engineered through a masculine and patriarchal system of regulation and control; the way in which the archive’s pornographic content and status as an instrument of oppression are exposed to the light is cast, in a palimpsestic sense, as a revealing of truth. There is certainly a sense in which Waters slowly reveals the true nature and purpose of Lilly’s books as pornographic tools of enslavement, but she does this to question, destabilise or otherwise rupture the meaning and coherence of the archive, rather than to imply in simplistic terms that it is something that can be conquered, overcome or cast aside.

As I outlined in the introduction, Waters has argued in her own critical work that the project of ‘retrospection [that] is a condition of homosexual agency’ is really only mapped out clearly for gay male sexual identity.¹⁹ Why, then, does she choose an archive of pornography, texts whose apparent purpose is to satisfy and arouse male sexual desire, as the means by which she makes a historiographic intervention that is concerned with tracing a history of female same-sex desire? What are the implications of taking real pornographic texts – real instruments of female

¹⁸ Mitchell, ‘That library of uncatalogued pleasure’, p. 175.

¹⁹ Laura Doan and Sarah Waters, ‘Making up lost time: contemporary lesbian writing and the invention of history’, in *Territories of Desire in Queer Culture*, ed. by David Alderson and Linda Anderson (Manchester University Press, 2000), p. 12.

oppression – out of their safe, dark and relatively obscure hiding place in the British Library’s archives and rendering them visible in a work of contemporary historical fiction? In making the case for the palimpsest metaphor as the key literary trope around which she constructs this historiographic intervention, do I thereby imply that her intention is to call into question the so-called ‘truth’ – that is, the first layer of the palimpsest – of masculine, patriarchal history and historiography?

In ‘Making up lost time’, Doan and Waters argue that the pressing need to map a history of female same-sex sexuality manifests itself in the desire of authors such as Caeia March and Ellen Galford to *trace* this ‘erotic genealogy’.²⁰ Gay male culture might subvert historical grand narratives, but – by virtue of the power inherent in all masculinities in relation to femininities – it also overlaps with them.²¹ Thus, Doan and Waters argue, gay men are able to draw on and participate in ‘an *unbroken* tradition of same-sex love’ in a way that lesbians are not.²² The project of lesbian retrospection cannot be carried out in the same way, or with the same tools, as the project of male homosexual retrospection; a different approach is needed. Waters’ turn to the masculine pornographic archive in *Fingersmith* can therefore be seen as a specific historiographic intervention made in response to the difficulty of finding evidence of female same-sex sexuality in the past. There are fewer historical records that document such acts because, as Rebecca Jennings points out, lesbian sexuality has never been criminalised, partly because legislators believed that to do so would draw attention to its existence.²³ To piece together this fragmentary record, historians of female same-sex sexuality have often turned to literary texts for affirmative evidence: Martha Vicinus, for example, observes that ‘[s]everal

²⁰ Doan and Waters, ‘Making up lost time’, p. 14.

²¹ Doan and Waters, ‘Making up lost time’, p. 12.

²² Doan and Waters, ‘Making up lost time’, p. 12.

²³ Rebecca Jennings, *A Lesbian History of Britain: Love and Sex between Women Since 1500* (Oxford: Greenwood World Publishing, 2007), p. 111.

nineteenth-century literary works, including Jane Austen's *Sense and Sensibility* (1811) and Christina Rossetti's *Goblin Market* (1862) portray intensely eroticised sisterly love', but that 'the sister metaphor [...] was not commonly used by women when they wished to indicate something deeper than an equal friendship.'²⁴ Sharon Marcus implicates a critical tendency to '[define] femininity in terms of male desire and heterosexual marriage' in the 'remarkably overlooked fact that almost every Victorian novel that ends in marriage has first supplied its heroine with an intimate female friend'.²⁵ Waters' excavation of the Ashbee archive in *Fingersmith* is, in this historiographic and literary context, a highly unusual intervention, one that questions the legitimacy of a lesbian literary tradition while insisting on the historical reality of lesbian erotic life, even as it contrasts its historical silence with the excesses of the masculine pornographic and bibliographic tradition.

The purpose of Doan and Waters' methodological and historiographic intervention is, therefore, twofold: to consider how writers of lesbian historical fiction have traced a lesbian erotic genealogy, and to decide what form this project should take in the future:

Should the popular novel be a site to recuperate the names and lives of 'suitable' or famous lesbians of the past, or is it better approached as a starting point to invent a 'history' haunted by the present and understood to take its authority from the imperatives of contemporary lesbian identities?²⁶

²⁴ Martha Vicinus, *Intimate Friends: Women Who Loved Women, 1778 – 1928* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), p. xxvi.

²⁵ Sharon Marcus, *Between Women: Friendship, Desire and Marriage in Victorian England* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007), p. 76.

²⁶ Doan and Waters, 'Making up lost time', p. 12.

Thus the debate about what lesbian historical fiction is for is framed as a tension between recuperation and invention. This is the point at which Waters later makes her own historiographic intervention with *Fingersmith*, which, as we can see here, is necessary because approaches thus far broadly adhere to one of two models, neither of which is entirely satisfactory. Firstly, in the novels of Ellen Galford, Caeia March and Paula Martinac, there is an attempt to recover a lost history through tropes of ghostliness and spectrality, the lesbian who is there but not there. This produces the impression that ‘alterity can be mystically overridden’, and any sense of multiplicity and plurality in sexual differences in the past is lost, or at the very least compromised.²⁷ Secondly, in novels like Isabel Miller’s *Patience and Sarah* (1969), there is the lesbians-as-isolated-trailblazers model, in which ‘the [...] restaging of lesbian ingenuousness leading to isolated romance is no more natural or authentic a vehicle for the recovery of pre-sexological same-sex configurations than any other.’²⁸ Doan and Waters argue that this detachment from sexology perpetuates a version of lesbian history that is marginalised and peripheral, and produces a sense of nostalgia rather than historicism. In *Fingersmith*, Maud’s apparent ingenuousness in her first sexual encounter with Sue is revealed in the second half of the novel to have been a performance staged to prevent Sue from understanding the true extent of her knowledge about sex, and to disguise the physical and emotional intensity of her response:

I thought I longed for her, before. Now I begin to feel a longing so great, so sharp, I fear it will never be assuaged. [...] *Everything*, I say to myself, *is changed*. I think I was dead, before. Now she has touched the life of me, the quick of me. (p. 282-3)

²⁷ Doan and Waters, ‘Making up lost time’, p. 15.

²⁸ Doan and Waters, ‘Making up lost time’, p. 19.

Doan and Waters' point about lesbian ingenuousness in lesbian-feminist historical fiction contextualises Waters' representation of female same-sex desire here. Maud's desire is, despite her necessary feigning of innocence, presented as entirely authentic, an impulse she cannot control. In a subtle metafictional sense, Waters comments on the inauthenticity of the lesbian ingenuousness model in historical fiction; throughout the novel, she also draws parallels between novels like Isabel Miller's *Patience and Sarah* and certain texts in Lilly's archive, in which there are always 'two girls, one wise and one unknowing' (p. 281). Maud and Sue are wise and unknowing at different times: in the first section of the novel, Maud appears entirely 'unknowing' when she and Sue first sleep together, but when we later read the same events from Maud's perspective, we understand that her knowledge of pornographic texts means that she knows and understands a great deal.

Doan and Waters cite two writers whose fiction is quite different from both the 'recovery' model of Galford, March and Martinac and the 'isolated trailblazers' model of Isabel Miller. Jeanette Winterson's troubling of temporal and spatial boundaries and refusal to associate the lesbian with a particular historical period amounts to a rejection of the idea of 'history' altogether; Jackie Kay's novel *Trumpet* (1998), which raises the question of whether we can or should define a relationship between a woman and a male-identified female jazz trumpeter as 'lesbian', complicates the notion that the 'lesbian historical novel' is a useful exercise in lesbian historiography at all.²⁹ The issue here, then, is determining where Waters' own fiction fits in relation to the model of lesbian historiography that she and Laura Doan ultimately call for:

It is only, perhaps, in such testings of the genre [...] that we find a sophisticated treatment of lesbian historiographical issues and contradictions, one that problematises

²⁹ Doan and Waters, 'Making up lost time', p. 25.

the very categories with which sex and gender are constructed. In the end, the relevance of historical fiction for 'lesbian life in the late twentieth century' may lie most fully in its capacity for illuminating the queer identities and acts against which modern lesbian narratives have defined themselves and which they perhaps continue to occlude.³⁰

It might at first appear difficult to define Waters' fiction in these terms. Her novels, despite their metafictional cleverness, authentic 'literary' credentials and obvious questioning of the categories 'sex' and 'gender', are inescapably realist and plot-driven in a way that those of Winterson and Kay are not. Apart from anything else, Waters' first three novels are set in the nineteenth century, a period that Winterson comprehensively rejects. The 'testings of the genre' and 'jettisoning of generic structures' that we see in Winterson's *Sexing the Cherry* (1989) and Kay's *Trumpet* may not be as immediately apparent in *Fingersmith*, but they are still there.³¹ (There is much more of a sense of generic – and temporal – boundaries being tested in Waters' fourth novel *The Night Watch* (2006), whose narrative starts in 1947 and finishes in 1941, so that the novel ends with its beginning.)³² Waters certainly achieves the troubling of generic structures that she argues is necessary to ensure the 'relevance' of lesbian historical fiction for modern lesbian identity, but she does so in a way that is perhaps more subtle; she does not, so to speak, wear her postmodern credentials quite so conspicuously or self-consciously.

Waters' engagement with Henry Spencer Ashbee's archive is central to her historiographic project. In implicating this archive in the palimpsestically repetitive and imitative abuse of women, she achieves precisely what she and Laura Doan call for: the revealing of 'the lure of history in lesbian writing, but also its limits.'³³ Thus the choice of Ashbee's dusty, weighty,

³⁰ Doan and Waters, 'Making up lost time', p. 25.

³¹ Doan and Waters, 'Making up lost time', p. 25.

³² Sarah Waters, *The Night Watch* (London: Virago, 2011).

³³ Doan and Waters, 'Making up lost time', p. 13.

voluminous archive as her key intertext is rationalised because it comes to represent this ‘lure of history’; the word ‘lure’ here is highly charged in the way it clearly implies something historiographically useful and productive, but also dangerous and risky. This, essentially, is what Doan and Waters mean by the ‘limits’ of history, which are revealed through the particular way Waters palimpsestically ‘writes on’ Ashbee’s archive. In using the metaphor of the palimpsest to represent a continuously, infinitely repeating *cycle* of oppression, rather than a more linear structure with a starting point and an end point, she questions the very notion that there is any sense in which history is ‘true’. Again, then, we can see *Fingersmith* realises the vision Doan and Waters set out for lesbian historiographic metafiction: ‘[the] juxtaposition of the genre of popular lesbian historical fiction against [...] inventive use of postmodern literary strategies.’³⁴ In other words, the combination of mass appeal and ‘literary fiction’ status, necessary for the project of lesbian retrospection, is precisely what Waters’ novels achieve.

The palimpsest metaphor in *Fingersmith*

A third of the way into *Fingersmith*, the narrative is taken up by Maud. We learn in this section that the texts she transcribes are pornographic. As I have explained, Christopher Lilly’s pornographic archive is not *based* on Henry Spencer Ashbee’s archive of pornography; it *is* this archive: the three volumes of Ashbee’s bibliography, and all the texts it cites, are held in the British Library. Whether taken together or separately, these volumes are, unquestionably, palimpsestuous, in that there are complex relationships between their different layers: Ashbee’s archive has been ‘written on’ by those who have produced critical responses to it, and the texts it references stretch back much further than the nineteenth century, so there is no immediately obvious point at which this particular palimpsest begins. Waters therefore uses Ashbee’s

³⁴ Doan and Waters, ‘Making up lost time’, p. 13.

archive to call into question the idea that the oldest layer of the palimpsest contains the ‘truth’ of history, and that it should therefore be of primary historical and scholarly value and interest. There is more than a sense here of Judith Butler’s concept of gender performativity, according to which socio-cultural gender norms become naturalised via iterative action.³⁵ In the same way that Butler uses drag as a means of illustrating the idea that gender is an imitation without an original, Waters achieves a similar kind of parody of the idea of historical truth: Maud is just the latest in a long line of women who have been oppressed and enslaved by a masculine pornographic tradition, and there are other women who will follow her. There is no starting point from which all this repetition derives, and no sense in which the first layer of the palimpsest can tell us more about history than any of the other layers. In a Butlerian sense, therefore, *Fingersmith* asserts that the appearance or semblance of historical truth is naturalised over time through repetitive epistemological and textual practices (such as, for example, the reification of certain historical master narratives in libraries, or in school textbooks): the ‘truth’ of history is no more stable than the ‘truth’ of gender. After all, as Kaye Mitchell points out, the repeated practices of regulation, maintenance and protection that are necessary to ensure the security of Christopher Lilly’s archive only serve to underline just how fragile and unstable it really is.³⁶

Nadine Müller acknowledges that the matrilineal narratives in *Fingersmith* are broken and fractured: Mrs Sucksby and Gentleman construct for Maud and Sue stories about their maternal inheritance which are fictional. Maud’s mother is Maud, not Marianne Lilly, as she – and the reader – believe until late in the narrative. Similarly, the palimpsest metaphor reveals, in a genealogical sense, that the layers of history do not exist in a continuous, linear relationship.³⁷

³⁵ Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble* (London: Routledge, 2008), p. xv.

³⁶ Mitchell, ‘That library of uncatalogued pleasure’, p. 175.

³⁷ Dillon, *The Palimpsest*, p. 4.

Even this approach, however, permits an adherence to some kind of model of linearity even while it is being refused: it is concerned, as the novel appears to be, with the search for origins:

I propose reading *Fingersmith*'s matrilineal narratives and the mother-daughter relationships they define as a comment on the (dis)continuities between feminist pasts and presents at the turn of the millennium, more specifically in relation to feminism's second and third waves.³⁸

Müller argues here that there is a third wave of feminism – represented metafictionally as neo-Victorian fiction itself – that does not necessarily grow out of feminism's second wave. The 'discontinuities' she mentions might refer, for example, to the points of generational tension and conflict that exist around issues like pornography and sexualisation. Thus Müller's argument rejects a particular understanding of the 'waves' model, in that it accommodates the fact that there are disagreements and disputes between feminists of different generations, but it does not reject the model itself. Angela McRobbie argues that the 'waves model of feminism' implies 'a linear narrative of generationally-led progress' and '[remains] tied to [...] Western-dominated kinship metaphors of mothers and daughters.'³⁹ Nadine Müller does acknowledge and interrogate '*Fingersmith*'s complex network of matrilineal narratives', so she cannot be accused of taking the approach that McRobbie admonishes here.⁴⁰ Müller also comprehensively rejects the idea of 'generationally-led progress'. She does, however, imply that Waters relies on the kind of 'Western-dominated kinship metaphors' to which McRobbie refers, and, in so doing, alerts us to the possibility that talking about waves and discontinuity at the same time might be rather difficult. (Note that McRobbie makes an implicit reference

³⁸ Müller, 'Not My Mother's Daughter', p. 111.

³⁹ Angela McRobbie, *The Aftermath of Feminism* (London: Sage, 2009), p. 156.

⁴⁰ Müller, 'Not My Mother's Daughter', p. 111.

here to Judith Butler, who challenges the idea that ‘kinship does not work, or does not qualify as kinship, unless it assumes a recognisable family form’ and highlights the punitive nature of the ‘claim that sexuality needs to be organised in the service of reproductive relations’).⁴¹ This, again, is where the palimpsest metaphor is useful: because the palimpsest contains within it the potential for endless, infinite reinscription, it allows us to understand that the ending of *Fingersmith* is not necessarily an ending, and that a similar kind of potential exists within Maud’s self-authored pornographic texts to become implicated in further oppression and enslavement.

Churnjeet Mahn observes that ‘[t]he palimpsest is intertextual by virtue of containing multiple layers of text within the same space.’⁴² Waters’ particularly rich intertextuality, with its inherent ideas of layering, imitating and ‘writing on’ other texts, is, in this sense, clearly palimpsestic. Wilkie Collins’ *The Woman in White* (1859) is perhaps the obvious starting point for discussions of intertextuality in *Fingersmith*, but the narrative structure of Waters’ novel also owes much to the classical detective story. There is the clear sense in *Fingersmith* that Sue and Maud must excavate beneath the surface of the fictional matrilineal narratives constructed for them by Mrs Sucksby, Marianne Lilly and Gentleman to find their own ‘true’ story. This, however, is the point at which Waters moves beyond the fairly linear and straightforward structure of the classical detective story to offer something considerably more complicated and sophisticated, and, again, to question the notion of ‘truth’. Despite her apparent adherence to a Dickensian structure in which the tying up of every narrative strand offers the reader a satisfying sense of something whole and complete and finished, she leaves Maud’s own texts open to further inscription in a palimpsestic sense. The palimpsest is made within and across

⁴¹ Judith Butler, *Undoing Gender* (London: Routledge, 2004), p.102.

⁴² Churnjeet Mahn, *British Women’s Travels to Greece, 1840-1914: Travels in the Palimpsest* (Farnham: Ashgate Publishing Limited, 2012), p. 26.

time; its processes of layering and repetition and reproduction do not have an end point. This subtly undermines our sense that Maud has overcome – or overwritten – her own oppression by Christopher Lilly and his library of pornography, something I will explore in detail later in this chapter.

Like Maud's writing, the palimpsest is both destructive and creative:

[A]lthough the first writing on the vellum seemed to have been eradicated after treatment, it was often imperfectly erased. Its ghostly trace then reappeared in the following centuries as the iron in the remaining ink reacted with the oxygen in the air producing a reddish-brown oxide. [...] Thus [...] rather than erasing ancient texts, the practice of mediaeval palimpsesting in fact paradoxically preserved them for posterity.⁴³

The first layer of the palimpsest is not lost through accident or circumstance; it is deliberately erased. Its emergence centuries later is therefore the revealing of something that was meant to be kept hidden. There is an intriguing similarity here between Dillon's work and a particular passage in *Fingersmith* – written five years earlier – in which Waters describes the palimpsestic nature of Maud's early training as her uncle's amanuensis:

My work itself is of the most tedious kind, and consists chiefly of copying pages of text, from antique volumes, into a leather-bound book. The book is a slim one, and when it is filled my job is to render it blank again with a piece of india-rubber. [...]

⁴³ Dillon, *The Palimpsest*, p. 12.

They say children, as a rule, fear the ghosts of the dead; what I fear most as a child are the spectres of past lessons, imperfectly erased. (p. 195)

For Kaye Mitchell, there is the sense in which this process of erasing and overwriting points to the possibility that Christopher Lilly's archive might one day be 'overwritten, overlaid with [Maud's] own desires' – in which case it must also be true that when it is, the texts Maud writes herself must also be vulnerable to the same process of erasure and reinscription.⁴⁴ This chimes closely with Dillon's assertion that the palimpsest highlights the risky, dangerous nature of reading and writing, and that there is a particular kind of pleasure involved in the most productive – and therefore *most* risky and dangerous – reading practices.⁴⁵ Tracking the palimpsest metaphor back through the novel reveals that Maud's co-authored texts can be seen as the point at which the 'ghosts' or 'spectres' of her 'imperfectly erased' lessons are chemically reactivated to seep through the surface layer of her new writing. In a palimpsestic sense, her writing practices are both destructive and creative. It is the 'creative' element, however, that complicates the reader's sense that her texts are a marker of some sort of female emancipation and liberation from oppression: she might literally destroy (with a razor) and then overwrite her uncle's texts, but the thing she (re)creates is both her own new text, and the old archive as it seeps through the surface layer. Kimyongür and Wigelsworth expand this definition of destruction and creation to accommodate suppression and preservation.⁴⁶ Churnjeet Mahn, as we have seen, argues that the structure of the palimpsest has the effect of paradoxically preserving that which was thought to have been erased for good.⁴⁷ In terms of Maud's writing, it is, paradoxically, her uncle's archive – the instrument of her own oppression

⁴⁴ Mitchell, 'That library of uncatalogued pleasure', p. 176.

⁴⁵ Dillon, *The Palimpsest*, p. 3.

⁴⁶ Angela Kimyongür and Amy Wigelsworth, eds., *Rewriting Wrongs: French Crime Fiction and the Palimpsest* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2014), p. 1.

⁴⁷ Mahn, *British Women's Travels to Greece*, p. 12.

– that she preserves. This is not to imply that the meaning of the archive is fixed or reified: rather, there is the sense in which, in accordance with Dillon’s palimpsestuous model, Maud maintains the archive as part of the structure of the palimpsest. The palimpsest is constructed over time in such a way as to effect the simultaneity of past and present, so Maud’s present as a writer cannot exist independently of her past as an abused child and young woman.

When Maud discovers that Sue is illiterate during their first meeting as mistress and servant respectively, she tells her that she ‘shouldn’t allow’ her to ‘be taught’ to read: ‘Ah, Susan, were you to live in this house, as the niece of my uncle, you should know what that meant. You should know, indeed!’ (p. 69). There is something else here that rationalises Maud’s suspicion of literacy, her envy of Sue’s illiteracy, and her apparent failure to understand that another kind of literacy exists beyond that which has been used to enslave her. The issue is not with literacy itself, but with the patriarchal model of a particular kind of *feminine* literacy that has been imposed on her. The palimpsest metaphor allows us to see that Maud’s transcribing of Lilly’s texts is reading and writing made into a domestic chore: repetitive, mindless, difficult, arduous, requiring care and painstaking work, done only so that it can be done again, without the satisfaction of a permanent result. Her writing is thus marked as feminine, and marks her as feminine, in the way it is analogous to other low-skilled, exploitative, repetitive practices associated with female labour – the factory production line, the maid washing the clothes of her aristocratic employers, the humble secretary taking dictation from the great statesman. The first layer of the palimpsest might be ‘paradoxically preserved for posterity’, but the results of women’s work are not.⁴⁸ The fact that Maud remembers the task itself more than the texts she has to copy points to the way in which the mechanical act of writing is privileged over the

⁴⁸ Mahn, *British Women’s Travels to Greece*, p. 12.

content of the writing: there is no possibility here of any kind of academic, intellectual or pleasurable engagement with the texts she transcribes.⁴⁹

In terms of the link the novel establishes between pornographic books and female bodies, the palimpsestic nature of Maud's writing and training allows us to understand how Waters goes beyond merely arguing that the book and the female body are one and the same. She implies that the female body is constructed as such through the imposition of a feminine model of reading and writing. Rather than being the means by which girls and women are educated or liberated, reading and writing are put to service in the legitimation and reification of 'proper' or 'appropriate' femininity. The point here is that it is very much Maud's *body* that is appropriated to ensure her oppression and enslavement, and the oppression and enslavement of a potentially infinite number of girls and women through the (intended) distribution and dissemination of Lilly's bibliography. Thus the repetition and layering that constitutes the kind of writing she is forced to do produces a similar kind of repetition and layering in the way that women's bodies are objectified, assessed, critiqued, catalogued and stored in pornographic literature. Maud's body, with all its attendant physical, cognitive and intellectual capacities, is feminised in a particular way through her training as Lilly's amanuensis. When Maud says that she is 'not taught as other girls are', she means that she learns 'to recite, softly and clearly' but is 'never taught to sing', or 'learn the names of flowers or birds'; she is 'schooled instead in the hides with which books are bound' (p. 195). Her indoctrination into pornography comes a few pages later, when she is given a book by her uncle, which 'is called *The Curtain Drawn Up, or the Education of Laura*' (p. 199). Maud then 'understand[s] at last the matter [she has] read, that has provoked applause from gentlemen' (p. 199). This seems to be a grotesque

⁴⁹ This takes place shortly after Lilly has recruited Maud as his secretary; she is being trained, essentially, as an amanuensis, and the novel does not reveal that the texts she transcribes at this early stage in her 'education' are pornographic.

perversion of the kind of education a girl of Maud's age would expect to receive in the mid-nineteenth century, so we might assume that Maud's reading and writing practices are *not* feminine. They clearly are, however, and thus the argument to be resolved is whether the texts she writes at the end of the novel signal her triumphant *escape* from this model of literacy, or whether she has – even in an ambiguous sense – been made complicit in it. This is the subject of much debate in responses to the novel that I consider later in this chapter.

When Christopher Lilly recruits Maud with a view to desensitising her to the pornographic texts she must read as an assistant to his bibliographic project, we see how the parts of the body that are particular markers of femininity and femaleness – her hands and her voice – are used and appropriated in a way that immediately produces an association between the body and the book:

The matron hands me an open Bible. I read a passage, and again the gentleman winces. 'Softly! he says, until I speak it in a murmur. Then he has me write out a passage while he looks on.

'A girl's hand,' he says, when I have finished, 'and burdened with serifs.' But he sounds pleased nonetheless.

I am also pleased. I understand from his words that I have marked the paper with the marks of angels. Later I will wish that I had scrawled and blotted the page. The fair characters are my undoing. [...]

'Well, miss,' he says, 'how should you like to come and live in my house? [...]' How should you like to come to me, and learn neat ways and plain letters?'

He might have struck me. 'I should not like it at all,' I say at once. (p. 182)

Maud's resistance here is short-lived: Lilly's methods of desensitisation and threats of punishment – 'Perhaps we shall mind you so little we forget to feed you, and then you die,' – work as he intends, and before long Maud admits that she has become what she was 'bred to be [...] – a librarian' (p. 182, p. 201). In this passage, then, the punitive consequences of deviation from appropriate femininity are made clear, as they also are later when Sue's asylum doctors insist that her (non-existent) madness is the result of 'over-indulg[ence] in literature' (p. 421). Lilly's systematic abuse of Maud therefore begins with the imposition of a palimpsestic model of writing, is developed through securing her compliance, and then perpetuated through ensuring her adherence to a model of literacy that is marked as feminine by the association of reading and writing with other appropriately feminine behaviours, like physical inactivity and vocal restraint. Thus Waters exposes the deliberate restrictions placed on Maud's academic and intellectual development by this feminine model of literacy: it is not reading and writing themselves that are marked as appropriately feminine, but the *physical acts* of reading and writing, which are explicitly about being quiet, unobtrusive and obedient, rather than actively and visibly engaged with and stimulated by the content of what is being read or written.

The way in which Maud is coerced into her role as Lilly's secretary through endless copying and erasing alerts us to the imprisoning potential of the palimpsest; reading and writing become a kind of repetitive cycle in which she is trapped. This is underlined by Waters' implication that deliberate, even rebellious, deviation from a feminine model of literacy, and handwriting in particular – 'Later, I will wish that I had scrawled and blotted the page. The fair characters are my undoing' – can be liberating for girls and women, as the implication here is that Maud would not have been recruited as Lilly's amanuensis had her handwriting been untidy (p. 182). In the context of the novel as a whole, however, there is a more ambiguous message here:

rejecting a properly feminine model of literacy might have the *potential* to be liberating, but girls must first endure some sort of punishment for transgressing these boundaries, and will encounter all manner of complications when they attempt to speak or write with an autonomous voice. Waters implies that the development of an autonomous female authorial voice, and, in turn, the escape from a palimpsestic model of literacy, is a lengthy and difficult process. Maud's reading aloud is acceptable to Mr Lilly only when her voice becomes a barely audible 'murmur'; before long she will be reading to Lilly's associates in a voice 'so clear and true' it 'makes the words seem almost sweet' (p. 212-3). In this way, an implied 'other voice' that is not available to Maud – the loud, assertive female voice – is, by association, aligned with other behaviours that have historically been seen as great affronts to femininity, from trouser-wearing to smoking to demanding the vote.

Abused turns abuser: Repetition, imitation and real and implied violence

The patterns of repetition, imitation and reproduction we first see in Maud's early days at Briar recur, often in a way that is associated with abuse and oppression, throughout the novel. In one disturbing passage, Waters explicitly engages with the idea that those who are abused become abusers themselves:⁵⁰

I am given another maid. Her name is Agnes. She is small, and slight as a bird – one of those little, little birds that men bring down with nets. [...] She thinks me kind, at first. She reminds me of myself, as I once was and ought still to be, and will never be again. I hate her for it. When she is clumsy, when she is slow, I hit her. That makes her

⁵⁰ Armitt, *Twentieth-Century Gothic*, p. 137.

clumsier. Then I hit her again. That makes her weep. Her face, behind the tears, still keeps its look of mine. I beat her harder, the more I fancy the resemblance. (p. 203)

In Maud's perception that she sees beneath Agnes' face a faint, spectral imprint of her own, there is the sinister suggestion of a causal link between Maud's childhood writing lessons and her violent abuse of her maid; through the repetition of certain key words and phrases – 'little', 'she reminds me of myself' – she makes the linguistic and structural characteristics of the passage mimic the rhythmic, repetitive nature of the abuse itself. The simile – 'slight as a bird – one of those little, little birds that men bring down with nets' – suggests an action that is, like archival processes of ticketing and itemising, careful and precise, rather than sudden and violent: the men 'bring down' the birds, rather than shoot or seize them, so that the calculated malevolence of the gesture is disguised. Agnes' extreme, exaggerated vulnerability has made her capture, and that of Maud before her, possible only through the application of the same coercion and control we see in the relationships between Maud and her uncle, and between Maud and Sue. What also emerges clearly here is the sense of a line of inheritance – someone preceded Agnes, Sue will follow Agnes, and Maud herself is a kind of slave, so that the figure of the oppressed, enslaved woman is endlessly copied and reproduced. The fairly matter-of-fact way in which Maud reports that she is 'given another maid' implies, again, the availability of an infinite number of such women. The sense that Sue is the next woman in this chain is underlined in a later chapter, in which Maud repeatedly marks her own knuckles with a knitting needle, then marks Sue's hands in the same way (p. 264).

This passage also raises the troubling question of self-harm: Maud's abuse of Agnes is presented here as a form of self-abuse. We see this again, in a way that reinforces Maud's and the reader's perception that she has become one of her uncle's books, when she destroys his

archive with his own razor. In line with the positive interpretations of the ending I consider later in this chapter, this scene is usually understood as Maud's moment of vengeance and defiance: she is 'killing her own enslaved body', or 'eras[ing] her own identity'.⁵¹ However, as an example of her ability to act with autonomy, and so escape the repetition and reproduction of the palimpsest, it is fraught with difficulties, complications and ambiguities:

Then I lift the razor, grip it tight, and fully unclasp it. The blade is stiff, but springs the last inch. It is its nature to cut, after all.

Still, it is hard – it is terribly hard, I almost cannot do it – to put the metal for the first time to the neat and naked paper. I am almost afraid the book will shriek, and so discover me. But it does not shriek. Rather, it *sighs*, as if longing for its own laceration; and when I hear that, my cuts become swifter and more true. (p. 290)

It might seem as though this act of cathartic violence serves as a metaphor for Maud's liberation from oppression: certainly she appears to take revenge here on the instruments of her enslavement, to retaliate, to exercise agency in destroying the books with her own hand. If we remember, however, that Maud feels that she herself has been made into a book, then what this scene describes is something much closer to an act of self-harm. There is the sense of ritual, of ceremony, of preparation – lifting the razor, prising open its hinge – and also of the desire for emotional and physical release that is often cited as a contributory factor in self-harming behaviour. (To the reader familiar with Waters' body of work, this episode also anticipates a moment in *The Night Watch* when Helen, Kay's former girlfriend, deliberately cuts her thigh with a razor blade.) If Maud is, as Costantini argues, really 'killing her own enslaved body',

⁵¹ Costantini, 'Faux-Victorian Melodrama', p. 35; Miller, 'Leaving Women's Fingerprints'.

then the implication that she is also harming herself is quite clear.⁵² Furthermore, this is, like the idea that abusers will become directly or indirectly complicit in further abuse, presented as inevitable: ‘it is in its nature to cut, after all’. Maud finds it ‘so terribly hard’ to ‘put the metal for the first time to the neat and naked paper’ precisely because it is her own ‘neat and naked’ flesh she is lacerating, as well as the pages of the book. The very deliberate precision and tidiness of the alliteration here reflects the smallness and vulnerability of the female body, producing a clear image of the razor cutting into skin, not just paper. We also see that Maud fears that the book will ‘shriek, and so discover me’: does she mean that the book – that her body – will discover her intention to harm it, or that she will be discovered by Christopher Lilly in the act of destroying the book? In her use of the word ‘shriek’ to describe the sound Maud fears the books will make, Waters signals that the cutting of the books is a kind of imprisonment, as well as a kind of release. When the hoped-for sense of relief is realised, the book ‘sighs, as if longing for its own laceration [...] my cuts become swifter and more true’. Thus the episode ends with an unmistakable note of something more erotic, almost sado-masochistic, and also repetitive: we observe, in a way that calls into question Cora Kaplan’s assertion that Waters never eroticises cruelty, the same connection between abuse and sex that is present in the novel’s ending.⁵³ I explore this in the next section of this chapter. Ultimately, Maud’s lacerating of the books can be understood as a rather emphatic *confirmation* of the psychological consequences of abuse, rather than a sign that she has overcome them.

⁵² Mariaconcetta Costantini, ‘Faux-Victorian Melodrama in the New Millennium: The Case of Sarah Waters’, *Critical Survey*, 18 (2006), p. 35.

⁵³ Kaplan, ‘Fingersmith’s Coda’, p. 51.

The palimpsest and *Fingersmith*'s ending: Production, consumption and the limits of the autonomous female authorial voice

At the end of *Fingersmith*, Sue's search for Maud brings her, finally, to the library at Briar, where, as we have seen, she makes the startling discovery that Maud is making a living out of writing her own texts, which, we are told, resemble the texts in the Lilly/Ashbee archive (p. 546). This, in a number of critical responses to this aspect of the novel, is construed as a happy, positive ending, in which Maud appropriates the tools that have been used to enslave her to inaugurate a new tradition of female-authored erotic or pornographic literature, and thus exercises the agency, power and autonomy that have been denied to her. In turn, Maud's writing is typically understood as a metafictional comment on the emancipatory and empowering potential of female writing and authorship in a wider sense. Adele Jones, for example, argues that this is 'a textual nod to the way [Waters] herself writes lesbian desire into mainstream culture.'⁵⁴ For Mariaconcetta Costantini, this is all closely bound up with Waters' representation of Maud and Sue's same-sex relationship:

Waters describes homoeroticism as a vehicle through which women challenge the laws of patriarchy and gain control of their bodies, emotions and actions. [...] It is fitting that her liberation should be achieved by gaining control over writing, which was the instrument of her physical and mental oppression.⁵⁵

⁵⁴ Adele Jones, 'The Feminist Politics of Textuality: Reading the Feminism of Julia Kristeva in *Fingersmith*, in *Sarah Waters and Contemporary Feminisms*, ed. by Adele Jones and Claire O'Callaghan (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), p. 125.

⁵⁵ Costantini, 'Faux-Victorian Melodrama', p. 35.

Costantini implies here that there is no darker side to Maud's writing; it signals, unambiguously, her liberation from oppression. The sense in which she might use her writing to gain control of Sue's body, as well as her own, is not considered; female writing somehow becomes detached from and immune to the complex discourses of power and gender politics that inevitably circumscribe all writing practices. This is not to say that female authorship is wholly oppressive, but neither is it wholly liberating. Female writing practices are compelled by these discourses to struggle for legitimacy, visibility and coherence, so this is not a straightforward matter of 'gaining control'. Some of the responses to the ending that read it as emancipatory acknowledge this contradiction and uncertainty: Hattice Yurttas, for example, argues that 'the voice [Maud] adopts is a masquerade that destabilises all identity categories and myths of origins', and ventures that 'the novel's conclusion [...] suggests the dawning of a new novelistic discourse in which the woman author produces her own plots on the vestiges of the defunct male ones.' But, Yurttas admits, this is only 'for now.'⁵⁶ Similarly, Nadine Müller argues that even if the potential for subversion in Maud's writing is acknowledged, '*Fingersmith*'s open ending becomes inherently ambiguous' if we 'reconsider the already established links between women's literacy, exploitation and oppression'.⁵⁷

I resist referring to Maud's self-authored texts as either 'pornography' or 'erotica' for two reasons. Firstly, it is impossible to determine which of the two they are because Waters does not write Maud's words into the novel (I consider the possible implications of this later in this chapter). Secondly, I want to avoid making the assumptions about the genre of Maud's texts that are made in some of the responses to this element of the novel. The belief that her writing can be generically categorised rests on a number of further assumptions: that 'erotica' is good

⁵⁶ Hattice Yurttas, 'Masquerade in *Fingersmith*', *Journal of Narrative Theory* 48 (2018), p. 124.

⁵⁷ Nadine Müller, 'Sexual F(r)ictions: Pornography in Neo-Victorian Women's Fiction', in *The Female Figure in Contemporary Historical Fiction*, ed. by Emma Short (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012) p. 121.

and ‘pornography’ is bad; that pornography is oppressive and exploitative only when men write it; that erotica cannot be oppressive and exploitative; that men write pornography and women write erotica. In exploring in detail how Maud’s writing is clearly produced by and through the Lilly/Ashbee archive, I consider the context and audience of her texts, rather than their content, which we do not see. Where I do use the term ‘pornography’, I follow Steven Marcus in doing so to refer to texts within the Ashbee archive that have always been understood and studied as pornographic texts. As Marcus explains:

I have decided in this work to use the word ‘pornography’ as the general descriptive term for most of the material discussed. [...] [A]s for the terms ‘erotic books’ or ‘Erotica’ which are in general currency, these seem to me little more than euphemisms which have through indiscriminate usage been hopelessly corrupted into the bargain, if indeed they ever meant anything. Most of the writing which is classified as ‘Erotica’ seems to me in intention, in effect and in fact pornographic, and I can find no sound reason for avoiding the term.⁵⁸

The purpose of this chapter is not to consider the differences between pornography and erotica and classify Maud’s texts accordingly, but rather to explore Ashbee’s texts as part of the palimpsestuous structure of *Fingersmith*, particularly in terms of the relationship between Waters’ use of them and the novel’s message about the legitimacy or otherwise of a female or lesbian erotic tradition.

⁵⁸ Steven Marcus, *The Other Victorians: A Study of Sexuality and Pornography in Mid-Nineteenth-Century England* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicholson, 1970), footnote on p. 36.

To return to Costantini, Maud's writing is a 'choice' that makes her into 'an autonomous subject.'⁵⁹ The problem with this perspective is that the very notion of 'choice' is, in this sense, highly problematic: it does not take into account how Waters makes it clear that while Maud's writing might well appropriate a masculine tradition, it is also produced by it. There is a sense in which this chimes with the concerns of twenty-first century feminism that young women are being encouraged to internalise and celebrate oppressive or objectifying practices: Angela McRobbie, for example, argues that the twenty-first century landscape of gender politics is characterised by 'resurgent forms of patriarchy' that make women the agents of their own and each other's oppression.⁶⁰ Similarly, Cora Kaplan asserts that *Fingersmith's* ending is '[i]ronic, but in no way punitive' and 'can be seen as a celebration and libertarian defence of the sexual and literary imagination, and its appropriation by women writers today.'⁶¹ It is interesting that Kaplan moves towards a slightly more ambiguous interpretation of the ending in a later response, where she acknowledges that the idea of women writing pornography is less palatable to second-wave feminist thinking.⁶²

It is the crucial issue of the *consumption* of Maud's texts that is left apparently unresolved by Waters, and (almost) unaccounted for in critical responses to *Fingersmith's* ending. Once Maud's texts are transmitted and consumed – once, in other words, they take on a new status as commodities to be transacted – any control she might have had over them is at an end. Thus it becomes apparent, in a metafictional sense, that neither Maud nor Waters herself can exert any significant influence over the ways in which their texts are read, interpreted and discursively positioned. To illustrate this, we have seen how Kaye Mitchell's discussion of the

⁵⁹ Costantini, 'Faux-Victorian Melodrama', p. 35.

⁶⁰ McRobbie, *The Aftermath of Feminism*, p. 19.

⁶¹ Cora Kaplan, *Victoriana: Histories, Fictions, Criticisms* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2007), p. 113.

⁶² Kaplan, 'Fingersmith's Coda', p. 51.

palimpsest metaphor focuses on Maud's early training as a scribe and secretary. The episode in which Maud is coerced into copying out a passage of text only introduces this image, however; tracking its copying and imitating elements throughout the novel reveals that the palimpsest metaphor's frequent but often more subtle appearances in the narrative cast doubt on the 'commonly held view' that the novel's ending should be read as unambiguously positive.⁶³ It reveals how Maud's writing of pornography is inevitably caught up in the same patriarchal system of exchange on which the deceptions of Mrs Sucksby and Gentleman are founded: her texts have an existence beyond the library in which she writes them, and a role beyond their capacity to underline the connection between reading, writing and desire in her relationship with Sue.

The recurring palimpsest metaphor in *Fingersmith* allows the reader to apprehend the way in which Maud's self-authored texts do not bring to an end the sedimentation of layers of female oppression. Her writing practices should not be understood as the triumphant appropriation of a male pornographic tradition, or the inauguration of a new, female tradition that signals autonomous female authorship: to do so implies that there is a clean linear transition from one to the next. Instead, the kind of 'sustained interrogation' the palimpsest affords allows us to understand that Maud's writing does not straightforwardly overwrite the male tradition in which she is steeped.⁶⁴ Her writing is an act of writing on the palimpsest, and what she writes remains open to new inscription. In other words, there is a sense in which the hidden layers – the male-authored texts she has been forced to learn and read and transcribe – will seep through her own texts, and thus contribute to the further oppression of other women, possibly in another archive, so that the process of layering and sedimentation will continue. Too often, Maud's

⁶³ Armitt, *Twentieth-Century Gothic*, p. 136.

⁶⁴ Armitt, *Twentieth-Century Gothic*, p. 3.

texts are seen as marking the end of this process, when in fact they mark just one of its stages; as Dillon asserts, the palimpsest contains not just the present, but past, present *and future*, and is constructed within and across time.⁶⁵ It may well be the case, as Paulina Palmer speculates, that although ‘it is generally assumed that these accounts [of female same-sex sexuality in Victorian pornography] were all written by men, there is [...] no proof that they were.’⁶⁶ It seems entirely reasonable to suggest, as Waters does through her historical research and in her characterisation of Maud, that some women must have read and enjoyed lesbian content in erotic and pornographic literature of this period.⁶⁷ However, the mere possibility – or even fact – of female authorship and readership does not preclude or diminish the oppressive potential of pornographic literature when it is distributed and consumed.

In Davidson’s terms, the palimpsest points to the materiality of the written text; this materiality makes it ‘difficult to isolate [the text] from its written environment’.⁶⁸ Christopher Lilly’s archive of pornography is housed in the library at Briar – which is also where Maud writes her own texts after his death. Thus this act of writing is not simply a matter of Maud appropriating her uncle’s space, resources and what remains of his archive, and overwriting them in a spatial and textual sense: as Davidson reminds us, the ‘papers and manuscripts [...] deposited in academic libraries’ alert us to the degree to which ‘writing is archaeological, the gradual accretion and sedimentation of textual materials.’⁶⁹ If we apply the palimpsest metaphor to the pornographic archive in Lilly’s library, we see that the accretion and sedimentation of textual materials – the primary sources (the archived pornographic texts) themselves, the bibliography of them Lilly produces, the transcribing and erasing Maud does as a trainee amanuensis, the

⁶⁵ Dillon, *The Palimpsest*, p. 12.

⁶⁶ Palmer, ‘She began to show me the words’, p. 78.

⁶⁷ Palmer, ‘She began to show me the words’, p. 78.

⁶⁸ Michael Davidson, ‘Palimpsests: Postmodern Poetry and the Material Text, in *Postmodern Genres*, ed. by Marjorie Perloff (Oklahoma: University of Oklahoma Press, 1989), p. 77.

⁶⁹ Davidson, ‘Palimpsests’, p. 79.

texts she writes herself – represent the appropriation, fetishisation and commodification of women's bodies throughout history. In her work on the palimpsest in early Christianity, Kim Haines-Eitzen underlines the long-standing connection between the body and the book:

Just as bodies were considered malleable, porous, corruptible and susceptible to invasion, pollution and disease as well as to shaping and formation, so also the books and texts they contained were vulnerable to modifications, misinterpretations, and misuse as well as correction and reformation. Like bodies, books were anything but fixed. [...] Books and bodies were vulnerable, and the fact that pains were taken to protect both books and bodies alludes to their power.⁷⁰

In *Fingersmith*, what happens to the books in the archive also happens to women's bodies. In this sense, Waters acknowledges the vulnerability of the female body, but also avoids denying women agency. Haines-Eitzen develops her argument by asserting that 'reading became a way to discipline, control and protect the body' and that '[t]he body writes, produces and disseminates the book.'⁷¹ Made into an instrument of the archive by her uncle, Maud is then heavily implicated in writing on, and so perpetuating, this archive – and thus in adding to the ongoing process of women's sexual and textual oppression by men and by each other. What is particularly striking is the way in which Maud's new occupation as a writer of pornography allows her to discipline and regulate Sue's body:

⁷⁰ Kim Haines-Eitzen, *The Gendered Palimpsest: Women, Writing and Representation in Early Christianity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), p. 9.

⁷¹ Haines-Eitzen, *The Gendered Palimpsest*, p. 23.

(*Sue's narration*) She led me to the fire and made me sit, and sat beside me. Her silk skirts rose in a rush, then sank. She put the lamp on the floor, and spread the paper flat; and began to show me the words she had written, one by one. (p. 548)

Kathleen Miller argues that this passage points to 'the possible creative, writing relationship [Maud and Sue] may share'.⁷² Similarly, Susana Onega classifies Maud's writing as 'a new type of pornography based on mutual *jouissance* and the abolition of the inequality between subject and object of desire'.⁷³ The way in which Maud is so clearly able to adopt the role of director or choreographer here, however, casts doubt on these claims of equality in Maud and Sue's relationship. Maud is in control of how Sue's body is positioned, and of how Sue engages with and reads the text; Maud is, in effect, 'writing on' Sue's body. We can even say that Maud enlists Sue in the process of writing, also in a metaphorical sense, on the palimpsest itself, so that the palimpsestic layering and accretion of textual materials continues even before Maud's texts are transmitted and consumed. This produces the possibility that Maud will be made complicit in further oppression and enslavement of other women, and that she will secure Sue's complicity in this process. There is also a subtle point made by Waters here about the lesser value attached to women's writing throughout history: the visible, readable surface layer of the palimpsest (here Maud's pornographic texts) is always of lesser value and interest to scholars than the hidden or shadowy first layer (Christopher Lilly's pornographic archive). Again, any sense we may have had that Maud's writing signals some kind of triumph over an oppressive, masculine, patriarchal bibliographic and pornographic tradition is significantly undermined.

⁷² Miller, 'Leaving Women's Fingerprints'.

⁷³ Susana Onega, 'Sarah Waters: Representing Marginal Groups' in *The Contemporary British Novel Since 2000*, ed. by James Acheson (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2017), p. 155.

In her Gothic reading of this passage, Lucie Armitt argues that Maud makes Sue into ‘a copy of herself on whom to re-enact tyranny.’⁷⁴ This is such a departure from the perspectives of Miller and Kaplan that it might at first seem outlandish. Waters, however, offers a subtle grammatical clue that lends credibility to Armitt’s interpretation. If we consider again the scene where Maud and Christopher Lilly first meet, we see that it establishes the patterns of persuasion, coercion, control and resistance that characterise not only the relationship between Maud and her uncle, but also between Maud and Sue. Armitt’s reading of the ending suggests that these reach a climax at the precise moment of Maud and Sue’s reunion. In particular, she argues that the Waters’ use of verbs and pronouns in the closing words of the novel – ‘She *led* me to the fire and *made me* sit, and *sat beside me* [...] and began to show me the words she had written’ – implies, in a way that is sinister rather than something to be celebrated, the persuasion and coercion of Sue by Maud (p. 548; italics Armitt’s). Waters’ subtle manipulation of grammar and syntax here implies that this is not an encounter in which the two women meet on equal terms (we might also italicise ‘show me’). Armitt’s argument can be developed by observing the revealing grammatical parallels between this scene and the much earlier chapter in which Lilly recruits Maud as his secretary, and she tells us that ‘*he* has *me* write out the passage’ (p. 182; italics mine). The patterns of coercion and persuasion, achieved partly through Waters’ positioning of subject, object and pronouns, are undeniably similar. This takes on a sinister significance when we consider that the earlier scene is clearly meant to be read as a prelude to abuse and enslavement; are we to read the final scene in the same way? The later episode is more ambiguous than the first, and Armitt’s bold assertion that Maud is going to abuse Sue in the way that she herself has been abused is perhaps a step too far – but the possibility opens up nonetheless.

⁷⁴ Armitt, *Twentieth-Century Gothic*, p. 137.

Lucie Armitt's take on the final sentences of *Fingersmith* is unique in its identification of such a dark, Gothic undercurrent, but the final words themselves – 'She put the lamp on the floor, and spread the paper flat, and began to show me the words she had written, one by one' – have been the subject of much scholarly debate elsewhere (p. 548). Perhaps surprisingly, they are often interpreted in literal terms, so that this is understood as the moment when Maud teaches the illiterate Sue how to read by showing her, *by pointing to*, the words she has written. For Paulina Palmer, for example, Maud produces texts featuring descriptions of lesbian sex and then 'shar[es] them with her lover Sue'.⁷⁵ Palmer does not elaborate on what she means by 'shares', although it seems clearer that she means to imply that they share the texts in the sense of reading them together rather than that they precipitate a shared physical and sexual encounter. Kaye Mitchell contends that the text Maud is writing 'becomes [...] part of an implied seduction, part of their romantic denouement'.⁷⁶ If we take Mitchell's use of the term 'denouement' literally, then we see that she understands Maud and Sue's coming together here as a kind of beginning as well as an ending, a moment of resolution and clarity that marks the point at which their real relationship begins. This seems rather too neat and tidy. Perhaps, in this single moment, Waters does unravel this particular thread, but others – to do with the consequences of Maud's abuse for the heroines' relationship, and the consumption of Maud's texts – remain densely woven to the extent that Waters never disentangles them completely.

There remains, however, a surprising reluctance to explicitly acknowledge the fact that Waters very much suggests that Maud *physically* 'shows' Sue the things she is writing about – in other words, that they have a physical sexual encounter that Maud initiates and then, it is implied, directs. Such readings do rather miss the considerable erotic potential of these lines: the

⁷⁵ Palmer, 'She began to show me the words', p. 78.

⁷⁶ Mitchell, 'That library of uncatalogued pleasure', p. 177.

sentence itself, with its careful, measured rhythm and steady, regular pauses, is strung out like the beads on a necklace, released slowly to the reader in teasing, tantalising fragments, almost with the sense that pleasure is being deferred until the last moment. Earlier in the scene, Maud tells Sue that the story she is writing is ‘filled with all the words for how I want you’ (p. 547). Surely, then, this is the moment when Maud shows Sue, literally and physically, the things the words describe, rather than – or as well as – the words themselves. Again, the sense that Maud is the agent and architect of this sexual and textual encounter, rather than an equal partner with Sue, is unsettling: the undeniable eroticism of the heroines’ reunion is undercut with something darker. Mari Hughes-Edwards argues that Maud ‘claims *some* of her agency by continuing to earn money from churning out the genre to men like her uncle.’⁷⁷ Thus Maud’s texts are trapped in a capitalist system of exchange, in which she must, with all the carelessness and concession to economic considerations that the verb ‘churning’ implies, provide a product for just the kind of man she has escaped from. Hughes-Edwards finds in this act of writing ‘only the illusion’ of liberty.⁷⁸

We are left, therefore, with the sense that Maud might perpetuate the abuse she has suffered in a less direct and deliberate way. Waters makes explicit the fact that Maud’s texts are distributed and sold; we can only infer from this that their consumers will be (mostly) heterosexual men. The possibility is thus left hanging in the air at the novel’s conclusion that Maud’s texts will end up in another pornographic archive, and may be used to abuse and enslave other girls and women. Here, again, elements of the palimpsest image that are to do with copying, imitation and reproduction emerge at a crucial moment, and notions of authenticity and autonomy are undermined. The texts Maud writes are presented as being influenced by the texts her uncle

⁷⁷ Hughes-Edwards, ‘Better a prison...than a madhouse!’, p. 147.

⁷⁸ Hughes-Edwards, ‘Better a prison...than a madhouse!’, p. 147.

has imposed on her; Sue is aghast to discover that ‘You are writing books, like his!’ (p. 546). Even if we do imagine Maud’s writing as some kind of marker of liberation from oppression, Christopher Lilly’s texts have a ghostly presence in it, like the ‘spectres of past lessons, imperfectly erased’ that Maud fears as a child (p. 195). Her uncle’s archive is overwritten, but it does not disappear altogether. As Paulina Palmer points out, Maud is able to produce these texts herself precisely because she has read accounts of female same-sex sexuality in her uncle’s books: the link between them is clearly implied.⁷⁹ In this way, the spectre of palimpsest reaffirms its presence at the precise moment when autonomy appears to have been achieved.

Where there is debate among scholars about Maud’s career turn as a writer, this is chiefly concerned with whether or not female-authored pornography/erotica ‘can be a sexually and socially liberating force for women writers and readers.’⁸⁰ Maud is the author of her texts in the literal sense of putting pen to paper, but the issue here is one of autonomy: if we understand that the ‘voice’ with which Maud writes is not – cannot be – autonomous, then a significant challenge can be mounted to the suggestion that writing *is* a means of producing an autonomous female subject. For Sarah Gamble, Maud’s texts establish Waters’ signposting of the difference

between the kind of male-authored representations of lesbianism with which Maud is familiar and the lesbian sexual act as it is actually experienced. [...] Lesbianism is not a parody or inferior imitation of the (hetero)sexual act any more than Sue is a forgery of Maud or Maud of Sue.⁸¹

⁷⁹ Palmer, ‘She began to show me the words’, p. 78.

⁸⁰ Miller, ‘Leaving Women’s Fingerprints’.

⁸¹ Gamble, ‘I know everything’, p. 53.

This perspective acknowledges the liberating potential of Maud's texts in terms of their capacity to authenticate and physicalise lesbian desire in her relationship with Sue, but it does not allow for the questioning of their autonomy in terms of authorship, or consider the implications of their consumption. We see, therefore, that the image of the palimpsest retains a presence in the narrative until the very last line of the novel; rather than standing as an unqualified celebration of female-authored pornography, the ending of *Fingersmith* highlights the absence of any authenticated female-authored texts in the nineteenth-century pornographic canon, and becomes a means by which Waters articulates female writers' struggle for authority and legitimacy in a wider sense. Ultimately, the striking absence of Maud's texts from the novel – the literal silence, in other words, of her female authorial voice – clearly legitimates the argument that the autonomy of her authorship is tenuous or unstable. Claire O'Callaghan argues that

the absence of Maud's narrative invites the imagination of the reader, encouraging them to reconsider ideas about women's engagement with pornography and what that might mean for gender politics, while at the same time exploring the creative possibilities of the sexual, homosexual and the pornographic marketplace.⁸²

In this reading, it is almost as though Waters engages the reader in an act of textual creation, which in turn extends the novel's metafictional examination of reading and writing so far as to invite the reader to consider her place in the system of the production, distribution and consumption of texts. O' Callaghan's interpretation also points to the emancipatory potential of Maud's writing in that it implies that Waters refuses to fix or pin down the content of Maud's texts: their meaning remains unknown or ambiguous. O'Callaghan continues:

⁸² Claire O'Callaghan, *Sarah Waters: Gender and Sexual Politics* (London: Bloomsbury, 2017), p. 93.

Indeed, if anything, the reader's inability to view the actual content of Maud's writing invokes the apparitional nature of lesbian sex, which reflects Castle's discussion of lesbianism and spectrality in *The Apparitional Lesbian* (1993) [...] The symbolic omission of sex here reflects the broader absence of female same-sex history, which suggests that Maud's pornography is lesbian pornography – that is, pornography that depicts lesbian sexuality made by lesbians, for lesbians.⁸³

I will consider Terry Castle's *The Apparitional Lesbian* – a text often cited in the scholarship on Waters – in Chapter 4, but for now I wish to focus on this argument that the silence of Maud's texts reflects the silencing of female same-sex history. Here, O'Callaghan classifies Maud's texts as 'pornography', using the word three times to describe something that, in a words-on-the-page-sense, does not exist. There is perhaps also something going on in terms of Waters not wishing to present Lilly's texts and Maud's texts in the same way. It can be argued that to give both their texts a presence in the narrative might have implied their shared or equal status as commodities to be produced and consumed. Thus we can say that while Waters wants to acknowledge that Maud's writing would not have been possible without the influence of Lilly's archive, her texts must be able to have some kind of a life outside it – in other words, some kind of authorial autonomy. This notion of autonomy also sheds light on the possibly unstable or incoherent nature of the *form* of Maud's texts. Waters makes it clear that the content of Maud's writing, even though we do not see it, is in part inspired by personal experience – that is, Maud's desire for Sue produces and is produced by the texts she writes. In this way, we see that the status of her texts as some kind of (pornographic) prose fiction can be called into question: they instead assume a new and inherently unstable form that lies somewhere between

⁸³ O'Callaghan, *Gender and Sexual Politics*, p. 93.

fiction and autobiography. Thus there is the sense here that the boundary between the private (Maud's physical and emotional relationship with Sue) and the public (the distribution, consumption and commodification of Maud's texts) is permanently destabilised. Continuing along this line of interpretation brings us to the inevitable conclusion that Maud, even with the protection of anonymity, makes her relationship with Sue available for public consumption. This requirement for anonymity is not gender-specific, as Waters makes clear: at one of the meetings with his associates at which Maud is required to read aloud from texts in her uncle's library, Christopher Lilly says that 'the authors of the texts I collect must cloak their identity in deception and anonymity. [...] The texts themselves are stamped with every kind of false and misleading detail as to place and date of publication and impress. [...] They are burdened with obscure titles. [...] They must pass darkly, via secret channels, on the wings of rumour and supposition' (p. 210). There is nevertheless a way in which the autonomy of Maud's writing is in doubt: if she is not known as the author of her work, her capacity to legitimately subscribe to the identity category 'author' is of limited potential in contributing to the production of her subjectivity.

Henry Spencer Ashbee's archive and the palimpsest

The image of the palimpsest is closely bound up with the idea of the archive, and specifically with the Victorian pornographic archive of Henry Spencer Ashbee, elements of which appear throughout the novel. Maud's acknowledgement that she 'so closely resembles' one of Christopher Lilly's books that she feels 'ticketed, noted and shelved' underlines the way in which she and the books have copied and reproduced each other, and implies archival processes of cataloguing and collecting (p. 284). We have seen how the way that Maud seduces Sue is careful, deliberate, precise, possibly premeditated; this same sense of care, precision and

deliberateness is necessary in the construction and maintenance of an archive. When Maud exercises the skills of coercion and control, we see how practised and fluent patriarchy is in seeking and securing the complicity of women in their own and each other's subordination. This sense that Maud is being made – wittingly or unwittingly – into an agent of a new or existing archive, with all the potential for endlessly repeating patterns of oppression and enslavement that this implies, is consolidated with the final words of the novel. When Maud shows Sue her words '*one by one*' we are left not only with the sense of the lesbian sexual act as lived experience, but also with the more troubling suggestion of the kind of cataloguing and collecting involved in the production of an archive (p. 548; italics mine). Maud's seduction of Sue thus becomes a kind of inventory, as well as an expression of love and desire.

The presence of historical male-authored pornographic texts in *Fingersmith* has a number of implications for critical responses to the novel. Firstly, for the researcher, Ashbee's archive is tangibly, materially palimpsestuous. The lavishly bound and illustrated copies of his three-volume pornographic bibliography extant in the British Library are his own working copies, in which he has inserted photographs, press cuttings and original, hand-written copies of letters from admirers who have read his work. It is an extraordinary document, the palimpsest made manifest: layered, sedimented, archaeological, steeped in hundreds of years of the objectification, commodification, oppression and enslavement of women.⁸⁴ The sense that Ashbee has written on his own palimpsest, and that the researcher's writing about the palimpsest continues this process, is inescapable. This tactile encounter with an archive represented in fiction offers a physicalisation of the connection between the book and the body.

⁸⁴ The pornographic texts catalogued date back to the sixteenth century.

In *The Palimpsest of the Human Brain* (1845), Thomas De Quincey hints at the fetishisation of the book that characterises Christopher Lilly's approach to bibliography in *Fingersmith*:

At length, however, this relation between the vehicle and its freight has gradually been undermined. The vellum, from having been the setting of the jewel, has risen at length to be the jewel itself; and the burden of thought, from having given the chief value to the vellum, has now become the chief obstacle to its value: nay, has totally extinguished its value, unless it can be dissociated from the connection.⁸⁵

What De Quincey is concerned with here is the separation of paper and ink – in other words, the separation of the book as a physical artefact from the intellectual and scholarly value of its printed content – that must be effected if fetishisation is to take place. De Quincey's fears about the disconnect between book and content would appear to be quite justified by the excessive fetishisation and commodification of the book we see in Ashbee's copy of the *Index Librorum Prohibitorum* (1877), the first of his three volumes of bibliography:⁸⁶

The volume is in large quarto and is printed on heavy, toned paper (it weighs almost four pounds). It has an engraved frontispiece and reproduces by photolithography occasional facsimile pages from works which it discusses in its text. It generously mixes inks and types of print: the title of each book noticed in the text is printed in red, the essential part of that title in Black Letter, and the names of authors, artists and publishers in Small Capitals; in the index, authors' names are in Small Capitals, titles

⁸⁵ Thomas De Quincey, 'The Palimpsest of the Human Brain' (1845)

<http://essays.quotidiana.org/dequincey/palimpsest_of_the_human_brain/> [accessed 8th January 2018].

⁸⁶ Henry Spencer Ashbee (under the pseudonym of Pisanus Fraxi), *Index Librorum Prohibitorum: Being Notes Bio- Biblio- Icono-graphical and Critical, on Curious and Uncommon Books* (London, privately printed, 1877).

are in Old English, and subjects are printed in Antique; and throughout the volume, capitals, italics, and other faces, along with a variety of spaces and settings, are freely used.⁸⁷

The *Index Librorum Prohibitorum* (the first of three volumes: the other two are the *Centuria Librorum Absconditorum* and the *Catena Librorum Tacendorum*) is, as we can see here, the product of Ashbee's extreme, compulsive, obsessive fastidiousness.⁸⁸ This particular kind of aesthetically pretentious fastidiousness is, Eileen Cleere argues, constructed as masculine by virtue of its attachment to the character of Frederick Fairlie in Wilkie Collins' *The Woman in White*.⁸⁹ Ashbee's almost absurdly idiosyncratic choices of paper, typeface and ink are ways in which the content – the words and texts themselves – is regulated and controlled; thus the excessive attention paid to these things becomes another way in which the archive is, through these processes of regulation and control, marked out as a restricted area to which only certain kinds of (wealthy) men have access. The ability to access this restricted area is, in turn, presented as a marker of privilege, something that men should desire and aspire to, rather than be ashamed of. This is why there is also the clear sense in which the lavish and luxurious production values of the *Index Librorum Prohibitorum* are intended to make something disrespectable respectable: this, Ashbee effectively says, is a book for gentlemen of wealth and class and taste (we might make a comparison here with the strip clubs of modern towns and cities, which insist that they are 'gentlemen's clubs', and market themselves in the same kind of visual language – red velvet, cocktail glasses, formal or classic font styles – of supposed

⁸⁷ Marcus, *The Other Victorians*, pp. 34-35.

⁸⁸ Henry Spencer Ashbee (under the pseudonym of Pisanus Fraxi), *Centuria Librorum Absconditorum: Being Notes Bio- Biblio- Icono-graphical and Critical, on Curious and Uncommon Books* (London, privately printed, 1879); *Catena Librorum Tacendorum: Being Notes Bio- Biblio- Icono-graphical and Critical, on Curious and Uncommon Books* (London: privately printed, 1885).

⁸⁹ Eileen Cleere, *Avuncularism: Capitalism, Patriarchy and Nineteenth-Century English Culture* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004), p. 12.

elegance and sophistication). In terms of the connection between the archive and desire, however, the sheer materiality and textuality of this particular historical artefact takes on another dimension: as Steven Marcus points out, Ashbee's extreme pedantry as a bibliographer has the unintended effect of 'reproduc[ing] on another level and in a symbolic way the chaos and disorder [it was] intended to bring under command.'⁹⁰

The *Index Librorum Prohibitorum* is a physical artefact before it is a repository for actual content. It is, in every sense of the word, very difficult to read. The considerable size and weight of the volume itself means that a certain amount of lifting and heaving and careful positioning is necessary before the cover can even be opened, at which point the apparently simple matter of decoding – where is the contents page? How do I even begin to find the particular text I want to look up? How, in this impenetrable web of typefaces and ink colours and various appended facsimile pages, do I work out how the book is organised? – becomes a lengthy and painstaking task. All of this, along with Ashbee's excessive quotations and voluminous footnotes that often take up very nearly the entire page, significantly compromises readability, and impairs the reader's capacity to make meaning from the text.⁹¹ This seems to go beyond a desire on Ashbee's part to produce an artefact that is as excessively and as ostentatiously lavish as possible: what it points to is his desire to legitimise as a subject for academic study something that is seen as illegitimate for such purposes, and, in so doing, to quite deliberately obscure or conceal the actual content of his writing, and of the texts he cites. The point here in relation to the representation of Ashbee's archive in *Fingersmith* is that the obsessive, compulsive, fastidious cataloguing of sexual desire has the effect not just of stifling *real* sexual desire, but of killing it stone dead.⁹² The researcher cannot help but feel that anyone seeking to

⁹⁰ Marcus, *The Other Victorians*, p. 52.

⁹¹ Marcus, *The Other Victorians*, p. 39.

⁹² Mitchell, 'That library of uncatalogued pleasure', p. 176.

arouse or assuage their sexual desire by reading the *Index Librorum Prohibitorum* would, faced with the task of wading through pages of Latin quotations, endless footnotes and ponderous lecturing on the science of bibliography first, find it wholly unsuited to such an endeavour. As Kaye Mitchell points out, Christopher Lilly's only real desire is for bibliography, for paper and ink, for particular bindings and endpapers and frontispieces.⁹³ The masculine pornographic archive, in these terms, becomes a dead thing from which lesbian desire must escape 'if it is ever to live and breathe.'⁹⁴ This is not necessarily true of the individual texts catalogued in the bibliography, whose living, breathing potential to enslave and oppress is signposted by Waters in the particular way she quotes directly from them in *Fingersmith*.

Writing on Ashbee's palimpsest: Waters' engagement with Henry Spencer Ashbee's archive

Because 'the act of writing about the palimpsest is a process of writing on the palimpsest', it might appear to be the case that those biographers, historians and novelists – including Waters – who write about Ashbee contribute to the process by which the status of his texts as legitimate objects for scholarly study is reified.⁹⁵ This proposition becomes particularly intriguing when we know that the first, crucial step in this process of legitimisation was effected quite deliberately and ingeniously by Ashbee, who more or less forced the British Museum to accept his bequest of the bibliography and all its cited texts by threatening to withhold another promised bequest of all his editions and translations of *Don Quixote*.⁹⁶ The failure of this quite audacious attempt at blackmail would, in all probability, have resulted in the entire archive

⁹³ Mitchell, 'That library of uncatalogued pleasure', p. 176.

⁹⁴ Mitchell, 'That library of uncatalogued pleasure', p. 176.

⁹⁵ Dillon, *The Palimpsest*, p. 9.

⁹⁶ Marcus, *The Other Victorians*, p. 37.

being sold at auction.⁹⁷ Ashbee's securing of institutional custodianship has had precisely the effect he intended, in that his archive has indeed been the subject of a number of biography and history volumes – and of *Fingersmith*. This is not to say that, in writing on Ashbee's palimpsest, Waters represents (or even misrepresents) his archive in a particular way; the real issue here is much more to do with what the novels suggest Ashbee's archive represents, and how this is revealed to the reader.

As I have explained, the scholarship on *Fingersmith* thus far does not fully explore this real archive and what it represents.⁹⁸ Reading the extant, physical archive means that those responses that interpret Maud's destruction of the books as symbolic of the liberation of 'her own enslaved body' can be challenged.⁹⁹ The first book she destroys with her uncle's razor is *The Curtain Drawn Up, or The Education of Laura* (1818).¹⁰⁰ This is also the first text she is made to read by her uncle, and therefore the one she most closely associates with her own enslavement. For the reader unaware that this text is real, and not an invention of Waters' imagination, it might be legitimate to argue that because the book itself has been destroyed, so has the source of Maud's oppression, but the researcher who holds a copy of this very text in the British Library knows otherwise. It thus becomes much more difficult to read this episode as a moment in which a woman takes her vengeance on the (masculine, patriarchal) archive that has enslaved her. Were *The Curtain Drawn Up* an entirely fictitious text, the reader would accept that it had been destroyed, along with other texts in Christopher Lilly's archive. In other words, we would have accepted its destruction as *literal* in some way, rather than – or as well

⁹⁷ Marcus, *The Other Victorians*, p. 37.

⁹⁸ Claire O'Callaghan, for example, considers the significance of Waters citing real pornographic texts, but without consulting the Ashbee bibliography itself. ("The Grossest Rakes of Fiction": Reassessing Gender, Sex and Pornography in Sarah Waters' *Fingersmith*', *Critique* 56 (2015), p. 560-575).

⁹⁹ Costantini, 'Faux-Victorian Melodrama', p. 35.

¹⁰⁰ Anonymous, *The Curtain Drawn Up, or the Education of Laura* [Puttin, Rogers and Co., Nineinch Street, 1818]. The British Library catalogue notes wryly that the imprint 'is fictitious'.

as – merely symbolic. Our sense that Maud causes irreparable damage to the archive is reinforced later in the novel, when we learn that Lilly suffers a stroke on learning of Maud's escape from Briar, and then later dies. This means that what is left of his archive remains in the library, and is not transmitted and consumed via his bibliography; Maud's actions thus bring about the failure of his bibliographic project. This would appear to legitimate critical responses that take the line that Maud's own pornographic texts represent the appropriation of a masculine pornographic tradition by a female author.¹⁰¹ However, this is all complicated significantly by the knowledge that Henry Spencer Ashbee's own archive was not destroyed, and does not remain in the hands of an individual collector. Ashbee's bibliographic project achieved complete success, not just in the sense that it was transmitted and consumed as he intended, but in that it has achieved the ultimate legitimacy and respectability of being preserved for posterity through institutional custodianship at the British Library, the most legitimate and respectable of such institutions.

Given the significance that Waters attaches to *The Curtain Drawn Up* in *Fingersmith*, it is worth considering the text itself in some detail. The extant status of Ashbee's own copy in the British Library is a stark reminder that Maud's destruction of Lilly's copy can only be symbolic at best: more than a hundred and fifty years after *Fingersmith* is set, the researcher can hold and read and study the exact copy represented in the novel – not destroyed or damaged, but preserved in almost immaculate condition. Thus when Maud slices the pages of the text with a razor, and the book 'sighs' rather than 'shrieks', we understand the nature of the archive: it contains one copy of each text within it, but other copies exist elsewhere, and will be used to oppress and enslave other women. This 'sigh', then, rather than being an indication that the

¹⁰¹ See, for example, Costantini, 'Faux-Victorian Melodrama', p. 35; Kaplan, *Victoriana*, p. 113; Miller, 'Leaving Women's Fingerprints'.

text is ‘longing for its own laceration’, is perhaps a sigh of despondency, of resignation – some sort of regretful acknowledgement of the inevitability of women’s oppression (p. 290). This becomes particularly apparent when the actual content of *The Curtain Drawn Up* is considered.

It is necessary to pause here to return briefly to the idea of matrilineal narratives, and to consider Eileen Cleere’s theorising of the avunculate in relation to the way that Waters uses *The Curtain Drawn Up* to signpost Christopher Lilly’s appropriation and control of Maud’s femininity and sexuality. Reading *Fingersmith* through something other than a patriarchal Western kinship model offers a way out of the perhaps unsettling implication that Waters adheres to this model herself. There is already a consonance between Butler and Waters in the rejection of a model of sexuality and kinship that is organised around the heterosexual nuclear family and reproduction. Although one of Waters’ key intertextual threads is tied up with the long history of matrilineal narratives in Gothic fiction, she nevertheless liberates Maud and Sue from ‘the male-authored plot of heterosexuality’ by making sure that Gentleman, the co-author of the heroines’ matrilineal fictions, meets a violent and bloody end (p. 503) that necessitates Mrs Sucksby’s sacrificing of herself at the hangman’s noose to save Maud (p. 524).¹⁰² For Cora Kaplan, Mrs Sucksby’s stoic acceptance of her death sentence for murdering Gentleman towards the end of the novel reveals Waters’ dependence on ‘a distorted but still sentimental and biological version of maternal love’.¹⁰³ Kaplan thus implicitly directs at Waters the same accusation that is sometimes directed at feminism in general: that it essentialises, even totalises, femininity and femaleness. In other words, Waters troubles or complicates, but does not entirely reject, a Western – and, inevitably, patriarchal – model of maternity, sexuality and kinship.

¹⁰² Diana Wallace, *Female Gothic Histories* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2013), p. 183.

¹⁰³ Kaplan, *Victoriana*, p. 112.

There is therefore a need to look for something else around which to build the argument that Waters *does* move away from over-reliance on the concept of patriarchy. The living, breathing, speaking presence of Henry Spencer Ashbee's archive in *Fingersmith* might seem to make this harder still. Matrilineal narratives do rely on a model of family and reproductive relations that is patriarchal: this is unavoidable. Critical responses to Waters' matrilineal narratives, however, do not adequately consider the fact that the key male oppressor in *Fingersmith*, Christopher Lilly, is the man Maud thinks is her uncle, not her father. Lilly is thus presented as an avuncular figure, rather than (or not just as) a patriarchal one. This is an apparently small difference, but it is one that is frequently overlooked, as Eileen Cleere explains:

[P]sychoanalytic, feminist and post-colonial critics rely heavily on a concept of patriarchy to explain both global and local forms of oppression. [...] This tyranny is especially remarkable in the field of literary criticism, even though the stark absence of parents is a nearly ubiquitous paradigm of nineteenth-century fiction. [...] Although few fathers can be found, the uncles proliferate.¹⁰⁴

In other words, the concept of patriarchy is used to explain a form of oppression that is in fact something other than patriarchal. This produces the clear implication that some literary criticism in this field legitimates this concept even while appearing to question or reject it. Avuncularism does not imply that oppression by uncles is merely a variation on the theme of patriarchal oppression. Cleere argues that it is through avuncularism that a 'more fractured and contradictory' model of kinship can be articulated, one that can accommodate a more fluid

¹⁰⁴ Cleere, *Avuncularism*, p. 2.

definition of ‘family’.¹⁰⁵ This same point has already been made, as Cleere points out, by Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, who equates avuncularism with kindness.¹⁰⁶ This is precisely the kind of genealogy that contributes to the problem Doan and Waters identify, whereby the project of homosexual introspection is only available to gay men.¹⁰⁷ What Cleere says about Wilkie Collins’ *The Woman in White* sheds new light on how Waters uses this novel as her key intertext (at least where plot and character are concerned) to highlight the impediments this model presents to lesbian identity development:

Even nineteenth-century novels that better reflect Sedgwick’s hypothesis that the bachelor Uncle is an inscription of the homosexual Uncle do not invite the possibility of heterosexual subversion as an option for their heroines. In Wilkie Collins’ *The Woman in White* [...] Uncle Frederick Fairlie’s extreme hypochondria, misogyny, fastidiousness and aesthetic pretension are recognisable as phobically stereotyped accoutrements of homosexuality, yet his subversion of a patriarchal model in no way liberates the two nieces in his keeping.¹⁰⁸

Waters is careful to point out that ‘Mr Lilly’s statements on book-collecting echo those of Ashbee, but in all other respects he is entirely fictitious’.¹⁰⁹ This passage, however, reveals that while Lilly may not resemble a real historical figure, he certainly shares a number of behavioural characteristics with Frederick Fairlie. This raises the intriguing possibility that Waters may mean to suggest that Christopher Lilly is himself homosexual, which in turn hints at the dangerous and punitive consequences for women of a particular kind of misogynistic

¹⁰⁵ Cleere, *Avuncularism*, p. 4.

¹⁰⁶ Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Tendencies* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1993), p. 58, cited in Cleere, *Avuncularism*, p. 10.

¹⁰⁷ Doan and Waters, ‘Making up lost time’, p. 12.

¹⁰⁸ Cleere, *Avuncularism*, p. 10.

¹⁰⁹ In *Fingersmith*’s acknowledgements.

oppression that is *not* bound up with sexual desire. In this way, the fact that Lilly does not sexually abuse Maud is accounted for by reasons other than his curious sexlessness. His Fairlie-like traits and behaviours – particularly ‘fastidiousness and aesthetic pretension’ – work further to undermine, in Cleere’s terms, our sense that the kind of oppression he exerts is straightforwardly patriarchal. The difference, however, is that Christopher Lilly is presented as being pathologically incapable of any sort of kindness. Even though both Fairlie and Lilly fail to prevent the arranged (heterosexual) marriages between Laura and Percival Glyde and Maud and Richard Rivers respectively, Waters does allow her heroines to subvert the institution of heterosexuality. Ultimately, then, neither a patriarchal nor an avuncular model can fully account for Waters’ representation of Christopher Lilly’s appropriation and control of Maud’s femininity and sexuality, and a closer examination of *The Curtain Drawn Up* is therefore necessary.

The Curtain Drawn Up is told, in a kind of ghastly perversion of the classic nineteenth-century *bildungsroman*, through the first-person narration of Laura herself. After her mother dies when she is a child, a governess, Lucette, arrives to look after her. As Eileen Cleere argues, there is a preoccupation with patriarchal oppression in scholarship on Victorian literature.¹¹⁰ This is a nineteenth-century pornographic text that features a father who is not actually a father: early in the story, he explains to Laura that he met and married her mother after she had become pregnant by another man. Nevertheless, Laura refers to him throughout the text as her father, without further explanation, rationalisation or qualifying inverted commas.¹¹¹ To the twenty-first-century reader, this problematises patriarchy, in that his status as her ‘father’ grants him unchecked power over her. Laura watches him and Lucette engage in various sexual acts, until

¹¹⁰ Cleere, *Avuncularism*, p. 2.

¹¹¹ I refer to him as ‘her father’ here for the same reason.

he invites her to join them. For some years after this, Laura's father makes her wear an elaborate and physically restricting metal chastity belt so that she cannot masturbate, before sleeping with her when she reaches the age of sixteen. This is presented as consensual, but to a twenty-first century reader, it is rape, both as real violence and as metaphor, the culmination of a long process of grooming and abuse. The following passage is fairly indicative of its content:

I seized Lucette's hand, and placed it between my thighs – I wished her to do for me what I had just done for her, but my father, covering my little mount with his hand, stopped these movements and put an end to our designs. He was too voluptuous a husband not to make a good use of his pleasures. He restrained his desires and recommended to us to be tranquil. (p.37)

Laura's desire here is presented as authentic and urgent – she 'seize[s]' Lucette's hand – and quite without artifice or pretension. This is, however, a pornographic text aimed at male heterosexual readers, so her impatience is intended to be arousing. Her father's control of her sexuality, and therefore of her (lesbian) desire, is, by contrast, much more calculated and premeditated. The way in which he 'cover[s] [her] little mount with his hand' is profoundly disturbing and sinister, with the strange and unsettling choices of adjective and noun emphasising her youth and physical smallness, but also hinting at the latent sexuality and agency that her father appropriates and controls. Christopher Lilly controls Maud's sexuality in a similar way: he deliberately and carefully brings about her premature transgression of the boundary between innocence and knowledge by exposing her to pornographic literature, and then, through making her immune to the graphic content of the books she reads, represses her capacity to understand that such a thing as real desire exists. When Maud reads aloud texts that 'tell of all the means a woman may employ to pleasure another, when she is in want of a man',

Waters alerts us to something that is immediately apparent in *The Curtain Drawn Up*: the idea in masculine, heterosexual pornography that lesbian desire is simply an inauthentic prelude to or rehearsal for the real thing – namely, penetrative sex with a man (p. 279).

The success and effectiveness of Lilly's archive as a mechanism of regulation and control is signalled in the way Maud cannot, at first, understand her desire for Sue in terms other than those circumscribed by Lilly's books – even to the extent that their words quite literally get in the way of the authentic desire that she can no longer deny or ignore:

I think of the books I have lately read, to Richard and to my uncle: they come back to me now in phrases, fragments – *pressed her lips and tongue – takes hold of my hand – hip, lip and tongue, forced it half-strivingly – took hold of my breasts – opened wide the lips of my little – the lips of her little cunt –*

I cannot silence them. I can almost see them, rising darkly from their own pale pages, to gather, to swarm and combine (p. 279).

Maud thinks that she 'cannot silence' these words, but the fact that she remembers only semi-coherent 'phrases' and 'fragments', rather than whole quotations, indicates that the archive is breaking apart and becoming incoherent. Thus the manner in which the words 'gather, to swarm and combine' might hint at their malevolence, but it is a fading into illegibility and unintelligibility, rather than a marshalling of strength. Similarly, the way that the words are 'almost' visible to her as they rise 'darkly from their own pale pages' suggests that they have assumed ghostly or spectral form – that they are, in other words, no longer able to maintain their living, breathing status in the face of her authentic lesbian desire. This foreshadows Maud's destruction of Lilly's books later in the novel, and signals that it is her desire, rather

than her uncle's razor, that destroys them. Her destruction of the books can thus be re-read as symbolic and cathartic, rather than literal and necessary. Again, then, we understand that liberation from the archive is not straightforward: this is why Maud is still unable to recognise that the words from Lilly's books are losing their meaning, and why the only way she can initiate lovemaking with Sue is to turn it into a kind of performance:

[...] I say, 'I wish – I wish you would tell me –'

'Tell you what, miss?'

Tell me. Tell me a way to save you. A way to save myself. The room is perfectly black.

Hip, lip –'

Girls love easily, there.

'I wish,' I say, 'I wish you would tell me what it is a wife must do, on her wedding-night...'

And at first, it is easy. After all, this is how it is done, in my uncle's books: two girls, one wise and one unknowing... (p. 281)

Here, Maud acts out a scene from Lilly's books, and she does so through a kind of heterosexual role-play with which Sue, who is similarly reluctant to acknowledge or admit her lesbian desire, plays along. Rather than delegitimizing the desire Waters' heroines feel for each other, this heterosexual performance works to underline just how authentic – and intensely physically and emotionally felt – this desire is: the way in which Maud and Sue temporarily inhabit the roles of 'husband' and 'wife' implies that the institution of heterosexual marriage is an inauthentic performance, and the lesbian desire that is materialised by this play-acting is entirely real. The whole episode is, in striking contrast to the pornographic texts that have provided the only accounts of sexual desire up to this point, tender and intimate and erotic, full of rich sensory

descriptions of lesbian desire as lived experience: Maud feels Sue's kiss as 'a falling, a dropping, a trickling, like sand from a bulb of glass' (p. 282). There is no question that Waters presents lesbian desire as authentic throughout the novel, but the troubling sense remains, right up to its conclusion, that Maud cannot completely escape Lilly's archive and all that it represents.

Given all that has already been said about Maud's control and coercion of Sue, the potentially sinister implications of the consumption and distribution of Maud's texts, and the silence of her own writing in the novel, it seems that the authentic desire that inspires Maud's writing serves another purpose. Maud's taking up of the pen to write her own texts thus reminds us that while Lilly is a highly methodical and exacting bibliographer, it is implied that he is incapable of producing original creative work himself. This accounts for his curious sexlessness, and explains why he is not an abuser of Maud in a physical, sexual sense; note that Mrs Sucksby's question to Maud on this matter – 'did he touch you, dear, where he oughtn't to have?' – is clearly rhetorical as far as she is concerned (p. 317-8). When Christopher Lilly's associate Mr Hawtrey remarks that Lilly's 'veritable Bible' of pornography will be 'the flesh made word', we understand why Maud's uncle objects so strongly to the inclusion of photographs and drawings in pornographic texts: he will never know or understand, as Maud and Sue do, 'the word made flesh' (p. 211).¹¹² Waters' heroines are endowed with the capacity to 'speak' this language of the body and of the heart from their first meeting, when their awkward but charged exchange about Sue's illiteracy is followed by Maud imagining, in Waters' deliberately stirring and erotic language, that Sue is 'fingering the silks of [her] gowns'

¹¹² There is more than a suggestion of Casaubon in George Eliot's *Middlemarch* in Waters' characterisation of Christopher Lilly: the dry, detached, sexless scholar supposedly working on a great project that is in fact nothing of the sort; the cataloguing of texts (a Key to All Mythologies, a bibliography of pornography) instead of producing and creating original work; lacking the key language skills (in Casaubon's case German; in Lilly's case the language of physical desire) that are necessary to fully understand one's subject; etc.

(p. 245). While this underlines the connection between reading and desire that already exists for the two women, it is clear that, for Lilly, physical intimacy can exist only in his imagination: he privileges words over images because ‘the mind clothes and fleshes them to fashions of its own’ (p. 216).

In her representation of Maud’s struggle to liberate her desire for Sue from the pages of Christopher Lilly’s books, Waters refers to the way in which much of male-authored pornography’s appeal lies in its depiction of female subservience to masculine power and control. In *The Curtain Drawn Up*, this is taken to extreme lengths, so that the extraordinary metal girdle Laura’s father forces her to wear makes it impossible for her to masturbate. When she asks why, he tells her in quite graphic detail that women who indulge in masturbation ‘die prematurely’ after suffering ‘an accumulation of diseases’ (p. 40). Laura is then grateful to her father for taking this measure, and he is presented – as he is throughout the text – as being kind and caring. Like Laura, Maud is physically restrained in such a way as to prevent her from masturbating: the gloves she is forced to wear are chiefly intended to keep her hands soft for handling Lilly’s books, but Lilly’s housekeeper Mrs Stiles remarks that they will also ‘keep her from further mischief’ in bed at night (p. 201). The gloves are perhaps not as extreme and brutal a preventative measure as Laura’s almost mediaeval chastity belt and iron girdle, but their effect is the same – to prevent her from experiencing sexual pleasure and desire autonomously, and before she is ‘ready’ for a man to take control of this process. There are a number of other parallels between the relationship between Laura and her father and between Maud and Christopher Lilly, and the motive behind Waters’ selection of *The Curtain Drawn Up* as the text that marks Maud’s transition from innocence to knowledge can only be fully illuminated by a close reading of the text itself. The second part of the title – *The Education of Laura* – is obviously of some significance here. Laura’s father assumes absolute control over

her sexuality; Christopher Lilly effectively does the same to Maud, but less directly, by making her an instrument of the archive. In particular, there is the same sense that the patriarchal figure decides when and how the young woman acquires sexual knowledge. She is not allowed any agency or autonomy over this rite-of-passage:

My uncle keeps the book in his hand, close to his breast, and taps its spine.

‘Do you see this title, girl? – Don’t take a step! I asked you to read, not to prance.’

But the book is too far from me. I shake my head, and feel my tears return.

‘Ha!’ cries my uncle, seeing my distress. ‘I should say you can’t! [...] Do you see that hand, beside your shoe? That hand was set there at my word, after consultation with an oculist – an eye-doctor. These are uncommon books, Miss Maud, and not for ordinary gazes. Let me see you step once past that pointing finger, and [...] I shall whip your eyes until they bleed. That hand marks the bounds of innocence here. Cross it you shall, in time; but at my word, and when you are ready. You understand me, hmm? (p. 188)

Here, the thing that Lilly keeps ‘close to his breast’ is not merely the book: it is Maud’s induction into adult sexuality and sexual knowledge. The images of looking and seeing – ‘oculist’, ‘eye-doctor’ and ‘gazes’ – clearly underline the sense in which Maud’s gaze – her knowledge of sex – is kept under Lilly’s control. He indicates quite explicitly to her here that *he* is the custodian of this knowledge, and that he has absolute control over how and when she is allowed access to it, and how she engages with and responds to it. It is significant that Lilly threatens to whip Maud’s eyes, rather than any other part of her body. Thus we understand that both Laura and Maud are receiving an ‘education’ of a similar kind, concerned with sexuality

and knowledge of sex – but while Laura’s father delivers this ‘education’ in literal, physical terms, via sexual abuse, Christopher Lilly delivers it in a much more metaphorical sense:

‘See here, Maud,’ he will say to me softly, drawing back the glass doors of his presses, passing his fingers across the covers of the texts he has exposed. ‘Do you note the marbling upon these papers, the morocco of the spine, the gilt edge? Observe this tooling, look. He tilts the book to me but, jealously, will not make me take it. ‘Not yet, not yet!’ (p. 199-200)

The way Christopher Lilly treats the books here is a kind of undressing: he ‘draw[s] back’ the doors that conceal them, and ‘expose[s]’ their covers. The body of the book is the body of the woman, in that there is the sense that physical and sexual characteristics, represented here as ‘the marbling upon these papers, the morocco of the spine, the gilt edge’, are itemised and inventoried, and that the man, rather than the woman herself, decides and controls when and how these are revealed. (There is perhaps an intertextual nod here to Robert Browning’s celebrated dramatic monologue *My Last Duchess* (1842), in which the speaker murders his wife, represents her in painted form and keeps the painting behind a curtain so that he can control who looks at her, and when and how they look.) Despite the slight hint of something erotic, we are nevertheless encouraged, again, to read Christopher Lilly as a dry-as-dust, sexless scholar in the Casaubon mould: he may collect and catalogue pornographic texts, but his interest in them is detached and scholarly, not grounded in real, physical sexual desire and behaviour. This, as Ian Gibson points out, is precisely the justification that Henry Spencer Ashbee makes for his bibliographic project.¹¹³ We see here, however, that the eroticised nature

¹¹³ Ian Gibson, *The Erotomaniac: The Secret Life of Henry Spencer Ashbee* (London: Faber and Faber, 2002), p. 43.

of Lilly's physical encounter with this book – and it is his copy of *The Curtain Drawn Up* – points clearly to the fact that the thing he is stroking and caressing and exposing is actually Maud's body. Even though he does not desire Maud's body himself, his actions underline the way consumers of pornography use it as a substitute for real, lived sexual experience. Christopher Lilly manipulates Maud's emerging sense of her own sexuality by making her curious about – by making her *want* – the thing that will act as the agent of her abuse and enslavement, just as Laura's father does in *The Curtain Drawn Up*.

Earlier in the introduction, I explained that I resist referring to Maud's texts as either 'pornography' or 'erotica' because Waters does not write them into the novel. The pitfalls of assuming they can be classified as one or the other is illustrated through the conflation of the terms in responses to the novel. In particular, Kathleen Miller uses the terms 'erotica' and 'pornography' interchangeably to describe Maud's writing:

By creating a new loving, erotic literature written and read for its pleasurable content, women writers and readers can control how they produce and consume certain pornographic texts and how these texts can assert power. Although the heroines prove unable to articulate their mutual sexual desire earlier in the novel, due to socially prescribed fears of sexual propriety and inherited madness, Maud's lesbian pornography allows her to express her sexual desires, not only physically, but also textually.¹¹⁴

Firstly, this perspective assumes, quite clearly, that a female tradition of producing and consuming 'erotic' texts can somehow operate independently of the masculine pornographic

¹¹⁴ Miller, 'Leaving Women's Fingerprints'.

and bibliographic tradition with which it is inevitably bound up; in other words, it is asserted that the *consumption* of such texts has the same emancipatory potential that the *writing* of them does. Secondly, we see here that Miller's legitimization of the term 'erotic literature' to describe Maud's texts is also founded on the idea that their content is centred on love and mutual sexual pleasure between women. In order to be able to make this claim with any certainty, we need to be able to actually *see* the words Maud writes – but Waters maintains the silence of her heroine's texts. As we have seen, the way Maud's writing is presented to Sue – 'it is filled with all the words for how I want you'; '[S]he began to show me the words she had written, on by one' – is ambiguous at the very least, and does not preclude the possibility of sexual coercion and control (p. 547-8). The only critic to really get to grips with the potential position of Maud's texts in a patriarchal system of exchange is Nadine Müller, who argues that:

[T]he extent of such works' subversion remains questionable, considering that they are commercial works created for a consumer market. [Maud is, like Waters] a lesbian author writing lesbian sex for a readership which is certainly not exclusively homosexual, a fact which raises questions regarding the extent to which such narratives of lesbian experience can be subversive, compromised as they are by market demands and sales targets.¹¹⁵

Here, Müller goes beyond those critics who focus on the production of Maud's texts to consider their symbolic function beyond this stage of the exchange cycle: Waters does not give us the story of who buys Maud's texts, as the narrative ends in the only way it could – with her two heroines united. However, given everything else Waters has to say – implicitly or explicitly – about the gender and sexual politics of the production, transmission and consumption of texts,

¹¹⁵ Müller, 'Sexual F(r)ictions', pp. 121-122.

it is reasonable to argue that she leaves a space at the novel's conclusion for the reader to reach the obvious conclusion about who Maud's commercial customers are most likely to be. We can at least say that the credibility of the assertion that Maud's texts make possible the physicalisation of her desire for Sue is not in question – as we have seen, what Maud does with the particular text she is writing when Sue finds her in the library amounts to a kind of staged and choreographed overture to their implied sexual encounter. The lack of a clear distinction between 'erotica' and 'pornography' in Miller's paragraph above is apparently resolved when she quotes from a text that Maud reads aloud to Sue:

Book lust becomes subsumed by human desire for another human body: 'Quickly my daring hand seized her most secret treasure, which my kisses reduced to mere murmurs, while my fingers penetrated into the covered way of love'. Maud uses the word 'love' [...] She does not write sex, she writes love; therein lays (*sic*) the difference between pornography and romantic erotica. [...] In her erotic literature she becomes a more 'active' partner than in her lesbian love scene. Whereas in their first encounter, Sue's fingers serve as sexual agent, in Maud's writing she assumes control of the finger as a source of female sexual pleasure – both Sue's and her own.¹¹⁶

As I said earlier in the chapter, there is an assumption made in responses to *Fingersmith's* ending about the differences between pornography and erotica, and which of the two Maud is writing. It becomes absolutely clear here that Miller's core argument – that Maud is writing erotica, and that her writing therefore represents and celebrates a tradition of erotic writing by and for women – is founded on the belief that the text Maud reads aloud from, and which Miller

¹¹⁶ Miller, 'Leaving Women's Fingerprints'.

quotes here, is one she has written herself. A closer examination of this passage in the novel reveals that Maud is, in fact, quoting from one of Christopher Lilly's books:

She turned more pages, read again. '*Quickly my daring hand seized her most secret treasure, which my kisses reduced to mere murmurs, while my fingers penetrated into the covered way of love –*'

She stopped. [...]

'Your uncle's books!'

She nodded. (p. 545)

Miller's belief that Maud is reading her own words produces a number of problems. Firstly, it implies that Maud's texts – namely, the actual words she writes – have a presence, a voice, in the novel. They do not – and the fact that they do not is, as we have seen, highly significant, because it significantly complicates the notion that Maud has an independent, autonomous, *female* authorial voice. Secondly, it denies or obscures the link between the texts that have been used to abuse Maud and the texts she writes herself. Waters clearly implies that the texts Maud writes are inspired by and – at least partly – imitate those in her uncle's archive:

'I asked a friend of my uncle's, once,' she said, 'if I might write for him.' [...]

'They say that ladies don't write such things. But, I am not a lady...'

I looked at her, not understanding. I looked at the paper in her hand. Then my heart missed its beat.

'You are writing books, *like his!*' I said. She nodded, not speaking. Her face was grave. I don't know how my face seemed. I think it was burning. 'Books, like that!'

I said. 'I can't believe it.'

[...]

‘Is there money in it?’

She blushed. ‘A little,’ she said. ‘Enough, if I write swiftly.’ (p. 546-7; italics mine.)

It is clear, then, that Maud is writing texts that are similar to those in Lilly’s archive. This point is exemplified not just through the words ‘like his’, but also through the implication that she is writing for the same audience. It is important to understand the words that serve as a prelude to her sexual and textual seduction of Sue – “‘It is filled with all the words for how I want you’” – in this context (p. 547). On the one hand, they legitimate Sarah Gamble’s argument that Maud’s texts are ‘authenticated by lived desire’;¹¹⁷ on the other, Maud does make it plain to Sue that she is writing for economic reasons, and therefore – surely – in accordance with the demands of her readership. The way in which Waters implies that Maud’s own writing is clearly bound up with and influenced by her relationship with Sue is overemphasised in responses to this element of the novel: in other words, it is often used to underpin arguments that Maud’s texts amount to her reappropriation of a masculine canon and tradition. Kathleen Miller also argues that Sue ‘realises Maud has taken back the pen for creative, rather than rote copying, purposes. Sue ‘reads’ Maud’s body, seeing her engaged in a sensuous act of authorship’.¹¹⁸ Again, however, there is the sense that the status and significance of Maud’s texts *beyond* the role they play in affording a more positive connection between the book and the body – that is, between the pleasure Maud seems to derive from writing and the pleasure she will experience in her physical relationship with Sue – is not explored.

¹¹⁷ Gamble, ‘I know everything’, p. 53.

¹¹⁸ Miller, ‘Leaving Women’s Fingerprints’.

The third – and most significant – problem produced by Miller’s misreading is that the quotation Maud reads aloud to Sue is taken from a text in the Ashbee archive. Given that we have seen how the texts Maud writes are clearly influenced and informed by those she reads, this clearly undermines Miller’s argument that Maud’s writing is a benign erotic literature of love. The text in question is *The Lustful Turk* (1829). Of all the Ashbee texts referenced in *Fingersmith*, it is the one that Waters quotes directly from at greatest length, and, as we have seen, the one that Maud reads aloud to Sue in the final chapter of the novel as a means of unambiguously illustrating what she has been made to do. The physical, tangible presence of this text at the end of *Fingersmith* only serves to more firmly underline the conspicuous absence from the narrative of Maud’s own writing:

Then she moved again, went to the shelves behind the desk, and took up a book. She held it, tight to her breast; then turned and brought it to me. She opened it up in her hands. Her hands, I think, were shaking. ‘Here,’ she said, as she looked across the page. ‘Or, here.’ I saw her gaze settle. And then, in the same flat voice she had spoken in before, she began to read.

‘*How delicious*, she read, ‘*was the glow upon her beauteous neck and bare ivory shoulders, as I forced her back on the couch. How luxuriously did her snowy hillocks rise against my bosom in wild confusion –*’

‘What?’ I said.

She did not answer, did not look up; but turned that page and read from another.

[...]

‘Quickly my daring hand seized her most secret treasure, regardless of her soft complaints, which my burning kisses reduced to mere murmurs, while my fingers penetrated into the covered way of love –’ (p. 545)

The immediately striking thing about this passage is that Waters uses the same language to describe what Maud does with the book as she does much earlier in the novel to describe what Lilly does with his copy of *The Curtain Drawn Up*: Maud holds the text ‘tight to her breast.’ Although the impression is given that Maud is nervous – ‘her hands, I think, were shaking’ – about telling Sue who she really is, there is still the suggestion that she is going to use this text to control and coerce Sue; this suggestion might be subtle, but it is there nonetheless. To the twenty-first century reader, this material might seem relatively tame. However, the impression produced on reading the whole extracts from which these quotations are taken is quite different:

How delicious was the glow upon her beauteous neck and bare ivory shoulders, as I forced her back on the couch. With what joy as in the full tide of vigour I divided her swelling thighs. [...] **How luxuriously did her snowy hillocks rise against my bosom in wild confusion.** Luckily she did not know what she was about to suffer. The confusion which seized her on my fingers entering again the cell of Venus for the purpose of introducing myself considerably favoured my proceedings. I felt its head between her lips, and with a vigorous thrust strove to penetrate, but so cruelly tore her delicate entrance that she screamed, tried to escape, and effectually threw me out. Inflamed with lechery and rage at this impulse I swore by heaven if she again resisted I would convey her back to the tomb. (p. 98)¹¹⁹

¹¹⁹ Bold type denotes parts of the passage included in *Fingersmith*.

Waters has selected the parts of this passage that are the least offensive, or perhaps in some way ambiguous in terms of the troubling suggestion that there is a clear distinction between erotica and pornography. When taken in context, however, it becomes apparent that these lines are taken from a text in which a passive female victim suffers pain, degradation and humiliation at the hands of a violent male assailant. When she does exercise some kind of resistance, her behaviour is construed as provocative, and she is threatened with death. The final words that Maud reads aloud to Sue also appear quite different when we consider what follows them:

Quickly my daring hand seized upon her most secret treasures, regardless of her soft complaints, which my burning kisses reduced to mere murmurs, while my fingers penetrated into the covered way of love. [...] Then she tried (but in vain) to remove my hand, while her closed eyes clearly told of the soft languor gently creeping in her senses. I scarcely knew how to account for my not having at that moment exacted my recompense for saving her from the jaws of death. (p. 97)¹²⁰

Thus we see that the point at which Maud stops reading is the point at which rape is justified on the grounds of entitlement. Any sense the reader may have had from reading *Fingersmith* that nineteenth-century pornography is relatively benign and tame evaporates here. These extracts from *The Lustful Turk* graphically depict sex – rape – as violent domination, involving the use of coercion and force, with the intention to humiliate and cause pain to the victim. There may be – probably are – editorial reasons as to why Waters cannot quote these texts in such a way as to show their true nature; she is, by this stage in her career, a highly successful and established novelist writing for a fairly mainstream audience. Nevertheless, the feeling lingers that the graphic and violent nature of the texts in Ashbee's/Lilly's archive is being concealed.

¹²⁰ Bold type denotes parts of the passage included in *Fingersmith*.

Given the novel's preoccupation with the risky and dangerous nature of reading and writing practices, there may also be a metafictional comment here: it could be argued that the novel functions itself as a kind of mini-bibliography of part of Ashbee's archive, and that it is the author's intention that the reader or scholar should seek a closer and more detailed engagement with the texts it represents. In this sense, then, *Fingersmith* emerges as the most palimpsestuous and palimpsestic of contemporary historical novels: the writer has written on Ashbee's palimpsest, and the reader is invited to continue this process.

Ultimately, *Fingersmith* remains ambiguous about the things with which it is chiefly preoccupied – the complex ways in which the masculine pornographic tradition is implicated in the oppression and abuse of women, the fragile legitimacy of female authorship, the seeking and securing of women's complicity in their own and each other's betrayal and subordination. This is, apart from anything else, a dark, dark novel – and it remains cloaked in this darkness right up until the final page, when Maud's apparent escape from abuse and enslavement only contributes further to this sense of ambiguity. *Fingersmith* is not, however, without its pinpricks of light; despite the novel's clear signalling of the significant challenges to female identity, agency and autonomy, there is a certain kind of cautious optimism about women's writing and authorship. The palimpsest metaphor provides the key with which to unlock – or at least explore – this sense of something contradictory and fragmented and uncertain at the heart of the novel. In implicating Maud's self-authored pornographic texts in further palimpsestic processes of objectification, oppression and abuse, Waters warns of the imprisoning and oppressing potential of the archive. The texts Maud writes are derived from one archive and are in danger of contributing to another: thus they do not truly represent or inaugurate an autonomous literary tradition of lesbian sexuality and identity. This is not a warning about female authorship itself; rather, it is a warning about how women's writing

should be positioned within discourses of gender, sexuality and power if it is to make available to lesbians the unbroken tradition of same-sex love that is available to gay men. Despite all the darkness, complexity and ambiguity of *Fingersmith*, Waters does point to a way in which the palimpsestic cycle of oppression can be broken: by ensuring that this tradition of female authorship – and particularly lesbian historical fiction – assumes a form more inclusive, more fluid and less rigid and prescriptive than the male pornographic tradition. In this sense, then, fragmentation, contradiction and ambiguity are desirable, and might – paradoxically – be the means by which legitimacy is achieved. It is not quite possible to say that Maud does this with her self-authored pornographic texts – they are too closely associated with and heavily implicated in oppression and abuse – but Waters implies that this is achievable if the lesbian literary tradition does not fall into the trap of following a patriarchal model of production, distribution and consumption.

It is in this sense that Waters fully realises the project of retrospection that she first mapped out in her own scholarship, and reveals why she chose an archive of male-authored pornography as the text with which to make her historiographical intervention. What Ashbee's archive truly represents, in historiographical terms, is cataloguing: the labelling and categorising and itemising of history. Lilly's/Ashbee's archive catalogues inauthentic sexual desire; the body of the book and the female body are linked in the novel so that we can see how the fetishisation and commodification of the female body in the male pornographic tradition is not rooted in, or derived from, authentic love and desire. Lesbian fiction is rooted in and derived from authenticity, Waters asserts – so it cannot be, and indeed should not be, archived and catalogued and stored in the same way. This is signalled to the reader in the way that Maud and Sue's desire for each other is initially incoherent and unintelligible precisely because it is outside archival control and regulation; lesbian desire 'cannot be so easily catalogued and

contained'.¹²¹ The image of the palimpsest mirrors the repetition, imitation and reproduction of the archive, and of the patterns of abuse and oppression women suffer at the hands of men, and at the hand of other women. The tradition of female authorship should not follow the patterns, processes and procedures of the male pornographic and bibliographic tradition, just as the project of lesbian historiographical retrospection should not (and cannot) follow the same route through literary history as the project of gay male historiographical retrospection. Waters could not have made this point if she had made her own historiographical intervention by engaging with, critiquing and palimpsestically 'writing on' a female-authored text. Despite all this questioning of truth and history, however, there is one historical truth that Waters reveals through her interrogation of Ashbee's archive: the true nature and purpose and intent of male-authored pornography, and the reality of the oppression and abuse of women, within and across past, present and future.

Conclusion

There is a confusion between and conflation of lesbian literature and female-authored lesbian erotica/pornography in responses to *Fingersmith*'s ending. The Ashbee bibliography, and its ghostly presence in Maud's own texts, is a means through which the novel explores the impediments to the establishment of a lesbian literary tradition that Doan and Waters identify in 'Making up lost time'. What *Fingersmith* seems to say is that this *cannot* be done through pornography – and I have shown in this chapter that there is plenty of evidence that Maud's writing grows out of a pornographic tradition, despite the silence of her texts. It is therefore surprising that critics extrapolate from the final words of the novel that Maud is writing erotica for consumption by a female readership, as though any writer has control over how her work

¹²¹ Mitchell, 'That library of uncatalogued pleasure', p. 178.

is consumed and interpreted. There is a strange blind spot in the criticism here. These responses fail to identify Maud's writing as pornography because it is written by someone who is a woman and a lesbian: she must therefore, surely, be writing an erotic literature of love. Some scholars have written about the novel's ending in a way that dislocates it not only from the rest of the novel, but from the particular historical and literary contexts I have explored here: it is even more surprising that no other scholar to date has closely examined the Ashbee bibliography as I do in this chapter. The way that Waters uses this real archive but changes what happens to it, so that in the fictive world of the novel it is destroyed, instead of being preserved in the British Library, is quite fascinating. Perhaps she is considering what might have happened – or, indeed, what should have happened – to Ashbee's texts and they not been vouchsafed for future scholarly study. Ultimately, the palimpsest metaphor allows the reader to understand that 'the spectres of past lessons, imperfectly erased' (p. 203) that Maud fears as a child *do* come back, in her own writing, and that any lesbian or female-authored literary tradition is always going to be caught up in a complex network of gender and sexual politics.

Chapter 3: The material turn in *The Night Watch*, *The Little Stranger* and *The Paying Guests*

Introduction

In Chapter 3, I examine the recalibrating of Waters' historiographical approach in her three twentieth-century set novels (*The Night Watch* (2006), *The Little Stranger* (2009) and *The Paying Guests* (2014)).¹ As Katharina Boehm argues, the transition Waters makes from the Victorian period to the mid-twentieth century is accompanied by a greater interest in the materiality of history, particularly in relation to the sedimentation of the past in buildings and objects.² In these novels, certain material objects – a ring, a pair of satin pyjamas, a decorative plaster acorn, a china gypsy caravan, a stand ashtray – are invested with the capacity to make the past tangible in the present. In particular, the reverse chronology of *The Night Watch* makes objects cross temporal and spatial boundaries, appearing, disappearing and resurfacing in different sections of the novel. In contrast, objects in *The Little Stranger* are malevolent and vengeful, implying a violent physical and cultural struggle between a working class on the rise and an upper class in decline. Waters' interest in the post-war shaking up of class structures continues in *The Paying Guests*, in which the small china caravan given to Frances by Lilian becomes part of a wider pattern of references to gypsy artefacts and culture that I argue constitutes a sort of speaking back to the affair between Vita Sackville-West and Violet Trefusis.³ Again, Waters highlights the potentially violent nature of innocent domestic objects:

¹ Sarah Waters, *The Night Watch* (London: Virago, 2011); *The Little Stranger* (London: Virago, 2009); *The Paying Guests* (London: Virago, 2014).

² Katharina Boehm, 'Historiography and the Material Imagination in the Novels of Sarah Waters', *Studies in the Novel* 43 (2011), p. 243.

³ ³ The writers had an affair in the early 1920s – the setting of *The Paying Guests* – which culminated in their dramatic elopement to Paris. Sackville-West's husband, the writer and diplomat Harold Nicolson, was himself homosexual, and the couple had a Bohemian understanding about their extra-marital same-sex encounters.

when Leonard discovers the affair, the three-way physical struggle that ensues culminates in Lilian fatally injuring him with the stand-ashtray. It is in this novel that Waters particularly warns against the sentimental fetishising of objects that can render them meaningless: the china caravan is at first a sincere token of Lilian's love for Frances, but Frances notices late in the novel that it is 'hollow' with 'a hole in the bottom' (p. 531).

Critical contexts

As I explained in the introduction to this thesis, I follow Jerome de Groot in understanding Waters' fiction as a historiographic intervention that puts into 'novelistic practice' the critical framework she sets out in her academic work.⁴ In her neo-Victorian fiction, Waters' historiographic approach is concerned with the textuality of history: her first three novels are all preoccupied, to varying degrees, with nineteenth-century reading and writing practices. In *Tipping the Velvet* (1998), the Bethnal Green home of philanthropists Florence and Ralph Banner is filled with socialist literature;⁵ in *Affinity* (1999), Margaret's attempts at historiography fail because she is unable to break free of the influence of her father's patriarchal methods;⁶ *Fingersmith* (2002), as we have seen, explores the oppressive potential of the masculine pornographic archive.⁷ Waters' fourth novel *The Night Watch* is her first set in the twentieth century. This change in historical setting is accompanied by 'an important shift in her literary engagement with the past':⁸

Trefusis' husband Denys was rather less open-minded, and the two men conspired to travel to France and bring the women home. The affair is vividly recorded in Violet's letters to Vita, but Denys Trefusis burned Vita's half of the correspondence. (Nigel Nicolson, *Portrait of a Marriage*, London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1973.)

⁴ Jerome de Groot, "'Something New and a Bit Startling': Sarah Waters and the Historical Novel" in *Sarah Waters: Contemporary Critical Perspectives*, ed. by Kaye Mitchell (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), p. 58.

⁵ Sarah Waters, *Tipping the Velvet* (London: Virago, 2002).

⁶ Sarah Waters, *Affinity* (London: Virago, 2002); Boehm, 'Historiography and the Material Imagination', p. 240.

⁷ Sarah Waters, *Fingersmith* (London: Virago, 2003).

⁸ Boehm, 'Historiography and the Material Imagination', p. 237.

[H]er two latest novels [*The Night Watch* and *The Little Stranger*] move away from [...] history's textuality and towards an approach that concentrates on the affective and disruptive ways in which tactile encounters with architectural places and material objects shape our investments in the past.⁹

In the passage quoted above, Boehm presents the reframing of Waters' historiographic approach quite explicitly as a 'shift', as a move 'away' from a textual approach and 'towards' a material one, thus implying that the two are distinct from one another. She is critical of 'approaches that regard the past as a purely textual event' and '[ignore] the historical novel's rich potential to explore questions concerning the materiality of history'.¹⁰ This argument is framed around a discussion of Waters' second novel *Affinity*, in which, Boehm contends, 'Waters' clever use of pastiche, intertextuality, and other devices of historiographic metafiction ultimately serves to highlight the limiting and potentially coercive consequences of approaching history as a textual construct only'.¹¹ For Kaye Mitchell, Boehm's article 'posits [...] a problematic view of historiographic metafiction as utterly unconcerned with material culture (and a view of textuality as something other than a material question)'; in other words, the notion of a shift denies the textuality of material objects and the materiality of printed texts.¹² As Beth Palmer points out, the use of different fonts for Margaret's and Selina's diaries in *Affinity* draws the reader's attention to the materiality of the printed text;¹³ as I have explored in Chapter 2, Henry Spencer Ashbee's bibliography of pornography is a material object just as much as it is a printed text, invested with the capacity to offer the kind of 'tactile encounter'

⁹ Boehm, 'Historiography and the Material Imagination', p. 237.

¹⁰ Boehm, 'Historiography and the Material Imagination', p. 237.

¹¹ Boehm, 'Historiography and the Material Imagination', p. 242.

¹² Mitchell, 'What does it feel like to be an anachronism?', p. 90.

¹³ Beth Palmer, 'Are the Victorians Still With Us? Sensation Fiction and its Legacies in the Twenty-First Century', *Victorian Studies* 52 (2009), p. 91.

with history that Boehm implies is the exclusive preserve of ‘architectural objects’.¹⁴ It is perhaps better to think instead in terms of the relationship between textuality and materiality, or the privileging of materiality over textuality for historiographic purposes, rather than a shift from one to the other. The merits of this approach can be illustrated through Boehm’s assertion that Waters ‘abandoned the Victorian period’ after *Fingersmith*. The change in her approach was in fact rather more subtle than this: as Ann Heilmann argues, *The Little Stranger* is constructed around an intertextual framework drawn from both nineteenth-century and 1940s influences.¹⁵

In her challenging of Boehm’s perspective, Kaye Mitchell argues that ‘it is possible to read *The Night Watch*’s [...] attention to the object as temporal object [...] as bound up with its attention to time’.¹⁶ She does not, however, acknowledge the distinction Boehm makes between objects that are relics of the past in the fictive present of the novel, and those that are recent or current to the characters, but historical to the twenty-first century reader. Her article focuses on those in the former category, which, she explains, are metonymic rather than mimetic, in that they ‘exist as vestiges of another time and place’.¹⁷ These include the worthless pieces of antique bric-a-brac that Duncan collects, among them an eighteenth-century ‘copperish jug, with a dent in its side’ (p. 26) from which he extrapolates the tea party at which it might have been used.¹⁸ Boehm’s focus on the metonymic function of objects in *The Night Watch* explains why she does not consider the most compelling object in the novel – Kay’s

¹⁴ Boehm, ‘Historiography and the Material Imagination’, p. 237.

¹⁵ Ann Heilmann, ‘Specters of the Victorian in the Neo-Forties Novel: Sarah Waters’ *The Little Stranger* and Its Intertexts’, *Contemporary Women’s Writing* 6 (2012), p. 38.

¹⁶ Kaye Mitchell, “‘What does it feel like to be an anachronism?’” Time in *The Night Watch* in *Sarah Waters: Contemporary Critical Perspectives*, ed. by Kaye Mitchell (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), p. 90.

¹⁷ Boehm, ‘Historiography and the Material Imagination’, p. 248.

¹⁸ Natasha Alden, “‘Accompanied by Ghosts’: The Changing Uses of the Past in Sarah Waters’ Lesbian Fiction” in *Sarah Waters and Contemporary Feminisms*, ed. by Jones and O’Callaghan, p. 74.

ring, to which I shall turn my attention later in this chapter. Unlike Duncan's teapot, the ring's origins remain obscure throughout the narrative, with Waters dislocating it from the point at which it came into being and instead focusing on its changing meaning as it is exchanged between female characters.

A detailed examination of the materiality of history in Waters' fiction has also been undertaken by Jerome de Groot, who offers a different reading of objects in *The Night Watch* within the context of a broadly similar argument about the novel's historiographic imperative. Boehm asserts that 'affective, intuitive, and sensual' encounters with objects have the potential to 'open up a new approach to the past that privileges imaginative speculation' over traditional forms of historical knowledge;¹⁹ de Groot argues that 'the tension between authenticity and provisionality' in representations of the past is central to Waters' work, and that this is 'particularly expressed' through the use of objects'.²⁰ Beyond this, Boehm's and de Groot's approaches are quite different. De Groot illustrates his argument through a close examination of Kay's ring, which, he contends, is how the novel 'critique[s] the wroughtness of 'history''.²¹ The ring first appears in the 1947 section of the novel, when Viv returns it to Kay. This, as de Groot points out, precipitates the collapse of Kay's world and the loss of her partner Helen to another woman, Julia.²² In the 1944 section, we learn that Kay was the ambulance driver who took Viv to hospital after her botched backstreet abortion, and that she gave Viv her ring so that she could pass as a married woman who had suffered a miscarriage with complications. De Groot's forensic examination of the ring exemplifies the key difference between his and Boehm's approach to materiality in *The Night Watch*: Boehm is concerned with objects that stand in for the past, while de Groot argues that the novel is 'interested in the plodding banality

¹⁹ Boehm, 'Historiography and the Material Imagination', p. 248.

²⁰ de Groot, 'Something New and a Bit Startling', p. 60.

²¹ de Groot, 'Something New and a Bit Startling', p. 58.

²² de Groot, 'Something New and a Bit Startling', p. 65.

of some objects, and their sudden transformation into [...] things that might kill (razors) or allow time travelling (Kay's ring)'.²³

De Groot also shares with Kaye Mitchell an interest in the connection between objects and *The Night Watch*'s time structure. Mitchell argues that time 'is presented [...] as something embodied in material objects'; Viv feels that Duncan's antique objects, with their traces of past human contact and handling, are disturbing. This, says Mitchell, makes the past 'something tangible' so that 'the gap between past and present collapses'.²⁴ De Groot understands the relationship between materiality and time quite differently, making a direct link between the novel's time structure – in which the narrative begins in 1947, goes back to 1944 and then ends in 1941 – and Kay's ring. He argues that the ring 'informs the entire text retrospectively' and is 'a clue' that 'the reader looks for throughout the narrative'; Viv's return of it to Kay happens early in the novel, taking her back to the evening she gave it away, and '[allowing] for conceptual, imaginative, memorial work to be done both by the character, and, later, by the reader'.²⁵ There is an echo of this perspective in Natasha Alden's observation that Waters' novels engage with 'our longing for the past'.²⁶ Time, then, emerges as the main focus in responses to *The Night Watch*, but it is only de Groot who considers in such detail how Kay's ring is both an object that travels through time *and* a reflection of the novel's temporal structure.

Given the attention de Groot pays to the connection between Waters' critical and creative work, and to the nature of the historiographic imperative behind her fiction, it is perhaps surprising that he does not consider her historical research methods for *The Night Watch*. Waters is an historian by training, and yet the influence of her research methods on her fiction has, as we

²³ de Groot, 'Something New and a Bit Startling', pp. 65-66.

²⁴ Mitchell, 'What does it feel like to be an anachronism?', p. 90.

²⁵ de Groot, 'Something New and a Bit Startling', p. 65.

²⁶ Alden, 'Accompanied by Ghosts', p. 75.

have seen, been overlooked in responses to her representation of Henry Spencer Ashbee's archive in *Fingersmith*. Boehm recognises the link between *The Night Watch*'s interest in the materiality of history and Waters' extensive archival research for the novel at the Imperial War Museum, citing an article for the *Guardian* in which the novelist explains that the potential for 'playful reinvention' was much more limited when representing a period still within living memory.²⁷ Waters makes clear the fundamental differences between research methods for a neo-Victorian novel and those for one set in the twentieth century:

For information about nineteenth-century life I had been more or less limited to books; now I had a whole new set of resources: films, photographs, sound recordings, civil defence records, the physical ephemera of war, and – since so many people in the 1940s felt compelled to make a record of the startling events they saw unfolding around them – a staggering collection of diaries and memoirs.²⁸

Waters' immersion in 'the physical ephemera of war' during her historical research for *The Night Watch* is apparent, at a more prosaic level, in what one reviewer of the novel calls 'the pure pleasure' to be derived from detailed descriptions of 'the ration books, the wireless, [the] Bakelite light-bulb holders'.²⁹ The tactile, sensory nature of her historical research for this novel is also apparent in Katharina Boehm's contention that *The Night Watch*

explores how an affective, intuitive, and sensual approach to the historical fragment [...] may open up a new approach to the past that privileges imaginative speculation

²⁷ Sarah Waters, 'Romance among the ruins', *The Guardian*, 28th January 2006 <<http://www.theguardian.com/books/2006/jan/28/fiction.sarahwaters>> [accessed 6th May 2016].

²⁸ 'Romance among the ruins'.

²⁹ Patricia Duncker in the *New Statesman*, quoted inside front cover of *The Night Watch*.

and emotional identification over forms of historical knowledge that are grounded in expert practices and official historiography.³⁰

Boehm is writing about *The Night Watch* itself here, but her words could also be applied to Waters' historical and historiographic research methods: there is a clear link between Waters' own 'affective, intuitive, and sensual approach to the historical fragment' and how she presents objects in her twentieth-century-set novels.

In this chapter, then, I develop Boehm's notion that *The Night Watch* and *The Little Stranger* (as well as *The Paying Guests*) are interested in how history is 'sedimented' in objects, adopting an approach that understands textuality and materiality as overlapping and interacting with one another, rather than existing separately. This idea of sedimentation, which obviously evokes the palimpsest, is also present in Rebecka Taves Sheffield's work on lesbian domestic objects, in which she argues that such objects reveal 'how history does not just happen, but is created and recreated over time'.³¹ Similarly, Lynne Pearce argues that history takes shape and effect through a 'will to repetition'.³² The work of all these critics underlines the sensuousness of objects, and their capacity to facilitate encounters with history that are potentially more tangible and more tactile than those that happen through printed texts. This is why I want to briefly return to David Platten's reading of the palimpsest before I consider the materiality of history in relation to Kay's ring: he argues that the palimpsest is 'sensual' and invested with 'chemical magic'.³³ I argue here that the same is true of the objects under discussion in this chapter,

³⁰ Boehm, 'Historiography and the Material Imagination', p. 249.

³¹ Rebecka Taves Sheffield, 'The Bedside Table Archives: Archive Intervention and Lesbian Domestic Culture', *Radical History Review* 120 (2014), p. 114.

³² Lynne Pearce, 'Romance, Trauma and Repetition: Testing the Limits of Love' in *Trauma and Romance in Contemporary British Literature*, ed. by Jean-Michel Ganteau and Susana Onega (Abingdon: Routledge, 2013), p. 82.

³³ David Platten, preface to *Rewriting Wrongs: French Crime Fiction and the Palimpsest*, ed. by Angela Kimyongur and Amy Wigelsworth (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2014), p. ix.

particularly in terms of how the ring moves through time and space, disappearing and resurfacing at certain points in the narrative.

Maryanne Dever's work on the materiality of written texts is important for my argument that the 'material turn' in Waters' twentieth-century fiction does not necessarily mean that she makes a straightforward shift from textuality to materiality in her historiographic approach; rather, the two continue to inhabit and interrupt each other. Dever asserts that prioritising the written content of texts at the expense of the material properties of the paper they are written on 'locate[s] paper and pages as seemingly neutral containers or platforms for the transmission of text'.³⁴ She frames this argument around an examination of the correspondence between Greta Garbo and Mercedes de Acosta, kept and obviously treasured by de Acosta for some time, and now stored in the Rosenbach Museum and Library, Philadelphia, and the State Library of New South Wales in Sydney. These items are a florist's card and a number of used manila envelopes, each containing a card. All these cards are blank, with nothing written on them at all. Something that should be a written text, that awaits inscription as a blank card does, becomes instead an object – but this does not mean that it cannot be 'read' as a source of meaning about the past. In the three novels under discussion in this chapter, Waters implies that objects are just as readable or unreadable (given their instability) as written texts, which in turn implies that written texts are not necessarily the most legitimate or productive ways of encountering and engaging with the past in the present. As for material culture in a wider sense, Dever calls for archival methods to resist a traditional approach to research that 'let[s] the possibilities of the page itself fall from view while we subject the words alone to our interpretive gaze'.³⁵ She goes on to explain that Garbo's letters and messages to de Acosta that

³⁴ Maryanne Dever, 'Papered Over, or Some Observations on Materiality and Archival Method' in *Out of the Closet, Into the Archives*, ed. by Amy L Stone and Jaime Cantrell (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2015), p. 66.

³⁵ Dever, 'Papered Over', p. 66.

do contain words are relatively innocuous, and have been used to dismiss claims that the two women had a romantic love affair. De Acosta's obvious desire to preserve and treasure anything and everything that Garbo touched, Dever argues, implies otherwise; the blank paper and cards say nothing, in a written textual sense, but they disclose what Garbo's words do not. The sense in which the blank cards are sedimented with this particular episode in lesbian history calls into question Boehm's claim that there is a shift from textuality to materiality in Waters' twentieth-century-set novels. Dever's work highlights the interplay between textuality and materiality in queer and lesbian historiography, echoing Mitchell's argument that historiographic metafiction *is* sometimes concerned with material culture, and textuality can be 'something other than a material question'.³⁶ The focus of my reading of materiality in Waters' novels is Kay's ring in *The Night Watch*. From here, I develop this discussion through another, but quite different, ring in *The Little Stranger* – Caroline's engagement ring. This leads to my reading of the decorative plaster acorn Faraday steals in the same novel; I then turn my attention to the silk pyjamas (*The Night Watch*) and the small china caravan (*The Paying Guests*) to illustrate the difference between male- and female-centred objects in Waters' fiction.

'But it lay there gleaming, undimmed by ash': *The Night Watch* and Kay's ring

The ring makes its first appearance relatively early in the novel, in the 1947 section. The build-up to this moment is worth examining in some detail, because it establishes a connection between Viv and Kay through a different sensuous object – a silver cigarette case. Viv is with Reggie, her married lover, when Kay crosses the street in front of his car. The reverse chronology means that the reader has no knowledge of the nature of the relationship between Viv and Kay at this stage of the narrative, but Kay changes when viewed through Viv's

³⁶ Mitchell, 'What does it feel like to be an anachronism?', p. 90.

perspective. Up until this point, Waters has presented Kay as alienated and isolated; in the opening pages, she feels that ‘she really might be a ghost [...] dissolving into the gloom which gathered, like dust, in its crazy angles’ (p. 4). However, when Viv ‘[turns] to look’ and sees Kay ‘drawing a cigarette from a case, and, with a stylish, idle gesture, tapping it lightly against the silver before raising it to her lips’ (p. 75), Kay is suddenly touched with glamour: she is not merely preparing to light a cigarette, but casually enjoying the tactility and sensuousness of the paraphernalia associated with smoking. Although Viv is distressed by the unexpected sighting of Kay – she ‘[cries] out’ and ‘[puts] up a hand to hide her face’ (p. 75) – her perspective gives Kay back a little of the style and swagger that we will later learn she had as an ambulance driver during the war. Viv is looking at Kay through the windscreen of Reggie’s car, which becomes both a symbolic and literal barrier between the two women and a means by which Viv can observe Kay without being seen; it hints at their past connection and underlines their current separateness.

Before Reggie can evade the traffic and comply with Viv’s request to ‘drive on’, Waters misleads the reader (p. 76) about Viv and Kay’s past relationship:

Viv kept her head down; but looked back once. Kay had joined the line of people outside the cinema: she was holding up a lighter to her cigarette, and the flame of it, springing up, through the twilight, lit her fingers and her face. *Hush, Vivien*, Viv remembered her saying. The memory was stark, after all this time – stark and terrible – the grip of her hand, the closeness of her mouth. *Vivien, hush*. (p. 76)

Jerome de Groot argues that *The Night Watch* ‘renders [...] the deconstruction of linearity as part of the fragmentation of self that are its themes’.³⁷ The act of lighting the cigarette is fragmented here, with Kay’s ‘stylish, idle’ tapping of the cigarette against the silver case separated from ‘the flame’ of the lighter ‘springing up’ by the interaction between Reggie and Viv in the car. Through this fragmentation, the novel signals its preoccupation with the materiality of history. It is not only that the novel’s three sections are in reverse order: here, Viv’s first glimpse of Kay, when she takes the cigarette from the case and puts it in her mouth, makes time elastic and slows it down. It is the precise description of the objects and Kay’s handling of them that makes this possible. The ‘flame [...] springing up’ thus becomes symbolic of the triggering of a memory in Viv’s mind, one that is clearly traumatic, and that she has repressed – it is ‘stark, after all this time’. The passage as a whole makes Viv and Kay’s history one that is accessible through material encounters, not textual ones, underlining the potency and allure of historical objects, particularly those that are personal and closely associated with an individual. In this way, the cigarette episode sets up the ring’s first appearance in the narrative.

After her sighting of Kay in the street, Viv arrives home and goes straight to her bedroom. We know that she is doing so in the context of what has just happened:

She stood undecided for a moment, biting her hand.

Then she went quickly to the wardrobe and drew back its door.

The wardrobe was filled with bits of old rubbish. There were some of Duncan’s old school-clothes there [...] there were even two or three ancient frocks of her mother’s, which her father had never wanted to throw away. Above the rail was a shelf, where

³⁷ de Groot, ‘Something New and a Bit Startling’, pp. 62-3.

she kept her sweaters. Behind the sweaters were photograph albums, old autograph books, old diaries, things like that. (p. 79)

This is one of many moments in Waters' novels that support de Groot's argument that her fiction is a queer historiographic intervention. The idea of a period of time whose point of origin is too far back to be discernible, together with the pervasive sense of neglect and deterioration, implies not just the lostness of a lesbian past, but also the necessity of hiding and secrecy. In this way, the ring is encoded as an object that destabilises boundaries of gender and sexuality even before Viv reaches the place where it is hidden. There is the sense of an accumulation of *things*: her brother's old, forgotten clothes; her dead mother's 'ancient' clothes, and then personal items that are associated with the storing and cataloguing of memories – photograph albums, diaries, letters. This is more than just the association of clothing and objects with the layering and sedimenting of history: there is also a hierarchy at work here, in which the least significant or meaningful things ('Duncan's old school-clothes') are nearer the front of the wardrobe than the older – and more sentimentally charged – 'ancient frocks of her mother's', which are nearer the front still than the more personal, autobiographical items (the photograph albums, autograph books and letters), which stretch back to an even more distant, and unspecified, point in time. Furthermore, the distinction between objects and texts is also destabilised, undermining the notion that Waters abandons the latter in favour of the former in this novel: the clothes are a literal expression of the materiality of history, but the photograph albums, autograph books and letters are both written texts and material objects in which history and the past are sedimented.

The further back an object is, the more precious and difficult to access it becomes. In this way, it is signposted that the next thing Viv gets to, through the layers of stuff and clutter, is going to be something very precious indeed:

[She] reached into the shadows behind the albums and brought out a little tobacco tin. [...] she'd placed it there three years before and hadn't looked at it since. She'd pressed the lid down very tightly then [...] She had to get a coin, and prise away at it with that. And when the lid was loosened she hesitated again – still listening out, anxiously, in case someone should come. (p. 79-80)

There are a number of things in 'the shadows' here. The phrase refers most obviously to the hiddenness of the ring, but it also suggests the mystery – at this stage of the novel – of its meaning and significance. Viv is about to retrieve an object whose past is associated with non-normative sexuality, so her action of reaching into something she cannot feel or see also reflects the hiddenness of queer history. The concealment of the ring in a tobacco tin echoes Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (1987), in which the tobacco tin is a metaphor, 'buried in [Paul D's] chest where a red heart used to be.'³⁸ Paul D keeps his past locked up in the tin, 'where it belong[s]' with the lid 'rusted shut'; he will not 'pry it loose now [...] the contents would shame him' (p. 72). The tobacco tin is a place where memories too painful to be disturbed are stored; thus Waters signals that the object Viv takes such a long time to bring out of her tobacco tin has similar associations. The intertextual link is a surprising one, representing quite a deviation from the established pattern of intertexts in Waters' fiction, which generally takes in canonical nineteenth-century and early twentieth-century texts, and more middlebrow mid-twentieth century ones. The relevance seems obvious, in that *Beloved* is also a work of historiographic

³⁸ Toni Morrison, *Beloved* (London: Vintage, 1987), p. 72.

metafiction in which memory is a kind of haunting, but the allusion is so subtle that it seems more spectral than Waters' other intertextual references; because we are not expecting to encounter it, it is as though it has been retrieved from greater depths than other references (to Bowen, for example), which seem to sit much closer to the novel's surface. In this sense, the novel performs a kind of metafictional spirit-conjuring, in that the *Beloved* reference comments on what Viv is doing in terms of bringing the ring, and the memories associated with it, out from a deeply submerged hiding place. There is also the issue of a white writer – one who recuperates a white past – referencing an African-American novel about the inherited trauma of slavery. Interrogating queer history's racial blind spots is not within the scope of this chapter, but I do consider this in Chapter 4.

Through the lengthy introduction of the ring over several pages, Waters sediments it with time and history. In her work on queer phenomenology, Sara Ahmed warns that 'history cannot be perceived on the surface of an object'.³⁹ It might seem as though Waters implies that it can when Viv finally unfolds 'a small parcel of cloth' to reveal 'a plain gold ring, quite aged, and marked with dents and scratches', but she arrives at this apparently superficial description of the ring only after encoding it as an object steeped in history and memory (p. 80). It is clear that the ring is old – and therefore precious and of sentimental value – even before this is confirmed through the signs of physical wear and tear; when we later learn the true nature of the ring's significance in relation to Viv and Kay, the 'dents and scratches' become the marks of trauma and suffering.

The movement and displacement of the ring through time and space reflects how the temporal structure of the novel allows Waters to comment knowingly on the response she knows the

³⁹ Sara Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology* (London: Duke University Press, 2006), p. 41.

reader is likely to have. Those familiar with Waters' earlier work will assume that Kay and Viv have had an affair, despite Viv's heterosexual romance with Reggie. This is one of a number of ways in which Waters repeatedly deflects the reader's desire to attach particular gendered and sexual meanings to the ring: here, we are tricked into thinking it might be a marker of lesbian desire and betrayal; we later learn it is an object exchanged between a queer character and a heterosexual one; later still, it evades signification again when it is used to simultaneously reinforce and destabilise the heterosexual institution of marriage. As Jessica Gildersleeve argues, this amounts to an act of collusion between two women against the institution of marriage when Kay 'allows the strange woman to wear her own ring in a charade of marriage [...] which testifies to the novel's vision of an ideal female community'.⁴⁰ De Groot sees the exchange of the ring between Kay and Viv slightly differently, contending that it 'works to concretize [Viv's] heteronormative identity' only in a performative sense; Viv might be in a relationship with a man, but she is not married.⁴¹ This is then further 'ironized by the fact that the ring has been given to her by a queer character', and its subsequent disappearance and reappearance stands for 'a physical link between the two women [...] while demonstrating quite how far apart they are'.⁴² The ring, then, echoes the car windscreen through which Viv observes Kay for the first time since their brief meeting.

Waters complicates things further by introducing a second ring, which, chronologically, is actually the first. Reggie gives Viv a ring so they can pose as a married couple, as the 'doctor' will not perform the abortion on an unmarried woman (it is worth noting briefly here that Reggie also has to pass as married, but the implications are far less significant for him). This

⁴⁰ Jessica Gildersleeve, 'Anxious Affinities: Gender and *Déréliction* in Sarah Waters' Neo-Forties Novels' in *Sarah Waters and Contemporary Feminisms*, ed. by Adele Jones and Claire O'Callaghan (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), p. 93.

⁴¹ de Groot, 'Something New and a Bit Startling', p. 65.

⁴² de Groot, 'Something New and a Bit Startling', p. 65.

ring, despite its apparently clearer meaning as a marker of heterosexuality, is, like the show flat in which Viv attempts to recover after the abortion, an obvious counterfeit, a sham: it is ‘gold-coloured, and ‘slightly too large’ for Viv’s finger (p. 386). Given that the objects in *The Night Watch* connect ‘disparate people through time’, this signals that the bond between Reggie and Viv is ultimately less meaningful and enduring than the one between Kay and Viv, who meet only briefly and in a professional context.⁴³ In the traumatic aftermath of the abortion, when she is bleeding heavily, Viv takes off Reggie’s ring and leaves it behind in the flat when she is driven to hospital in an ambulance. Even in her moment of crisis, Viv understands the consequences for an unmarried woman of arriving at hospital suffering from what Kay – the driver of the ambulance – intends to present as a ‘miscarriage, with complications’ (p. 414):

‘I’ve got to go back!’ said Viv, beginning to struggle. ‘Just let me go back and get my ring! It’s no good, without it –’

‘Here’s your ring!’ said Kay, suddenly. ‘Here’s your ring. Look.’

She had drawn away from Viv and put her own hands together; she worked them as if wringing them for a second, then produced a little circle of gold. (p. 416)

Here, the changing of the ring’s meaning is signalled by Kay’s magician’s gesture – she does not merely take off the ring, but produces it as if from nowhere. Adele Jones argues that the ring both shores up and dismantles the heteronormative structures it symbolises: as a hidden object, it signals Viv’s increasing disillusionment with the heteronormative role that she performs in her relationship with Reggie.⁴⁴ Where de Groot argues that the reifying of Viv’s heteronormative identity is ironic, Jones sees the shifting meaning of the ring in stronger terms,

⁴³ de Groot, ‘Something New and a Bit Startling’, p. 65.

⁴⁴ Adele Jones, ‘Disrupting the Continuum: Collapsing space and time in Sarah Waters’ *The Night Watch*’, *Journal of Gender Studies* 23 (2013), p. 36.

asserting that ‘paradoxically [...] the ring, as a signifier of heterosexuality and marriage, is emptied of all meaning through its possession and giving by Kay’, and becomes instead ‘a symbol of the threat posed by autonomous female sexuality’.⁴⁵ We see, then, that the ring has been read in terms of how it is caught up with the politics of gender and sexual identity, and as a means by which the novel engages with the materiality of history. There is, however, something else going on too:

She did it so swiftly and subtly, it was like magic.

‘You had it, after all?’ asked Viv, in amazement and relief; and Kay nodded:

‘Yes.’ She lifted Viv’s hand, and slid the ring along her finger.

‘It feels different.’

‘That’s because you’re ill.’

‘Is it?’

[...]

Viv felt herself being lifted. Soon she was moving through cold air... (p. 416)

In the scholarship on Waters, the focus remains so firmly on gender and sexuality that other concerns are sometimes overlooked. The sense in which the ring is a magic object is signalled quite clearly at the beginning of this passage, with the use of the word ‘magic’ to describe the action through which Kay takes off her own ring and pretends it is Viv’s. The two rings in the novel – the one Viv returns to Kay in 1947, and the one Viv loses in 1944 – are so implicated in the novel’s performances of gendered and sexual identity that as well as helping Viv to pass as a married woman, the second ring has to pass here as the first. The notion of something magic is introduced through the effortlessness with which Kay makes this possible; it is a kind

⁴⁵ Jones, ‘Disrupting the Continuum’, p. 36.

of conjuror's trick, deft and clever and deceptive, both a producing of the ring from thin air and a changing of its meaning. The ring is also described earlier as a 'circle of gold', at which point it is detached from all the meanings it is associated with when it is a wedding ring. When Viv says that 'it feels different', this is not just because it is Kay's ring and not hers, and therefore feels unfamiliar; it is also because in becoming something that comforts Viv when she is in great pain and danger, the ring transcends the meanings with which it has hitherto been associated. This is the sense in which it is a magic ring. We recognise that when Viv feels herself 'being lifted' and 'moving through cold air', Kay and Mickey are lifting her onto the stretcher and taking her out to the ambulance, but there is also an insinuation of something ghostly or supernatural. This is clearer still earlier in the novel (but later in the lives of the characters), when Viv has given the ring back to Kay three years after the abortion:

She turned the ring in her fingers [...], but even the slight weight of it seemed too heavy for her hand. She gazed about, listlessly, for somewhere to put it, and finally dropped it into the pie-dish, among the cigarette stubs.

But it lay there gleaming, undimmed by ash; it kept drawing her eye, and after a minute she fished it out and rubbed it clean. (p. 171)

This is the penultimate paragraph of the 1947 section of *The Night Watch* – the end of Kay's story, but only the end of the first section of the novel. If we think of the sections in chronological order, this is, therefore, the last time we see the ring, but its status as a talismanic object is reinforced and reasserted at the very moment the novel effectively 'ends'. The significance of this is, to an extent, disguised by the fact that the novel itself continues, so that we do not necessarily notice that the story ends with Kay and the ring reunited, and a lost, displaced object restored to its rightful place. She has not tried to find the ring; it has,

apparently, found *her*, and so it is invested here with some kind of power that deflects and defies her attempts to cast it aside or render it meaningless. In this sense, the ring is associated not only with Viv and Kay's connection, but also with Mr Leonard, the Christian Science healer whose offices are below Kay's flat. In the final paragraph of the 1947 section – the one immediately following the passage quoted above – Mr Leonard 'send[s] out his fierce benediction into the fragility of the night' (p. 171). This further invests the ring with some kind of power that is not merely supernatural or magical, but is also about healing.

This does rather complicate responses to *The Night Watch* that insist upon its foreclosure of any idea of a future, particularly for Kay. Kaye Mitchell, for example, points to the novel's

tacit refusal of closure and progress for the characters who find themselves with 'no future' and no way of moving forward. [...] Kay is outside regulated, (hetero)normative time, operating instead within a temporality based on reflection and experience, and complicated by the pull of the past [...] she is, literally, *not present*, she refuses the lure of the present, still more the lure of the future.⁴⁶

Despite what Mitchell says here, the final appearance of Kay and her ring in the novel's chronology suggests that it is not necessarily the case that she does not have a 'way of moving forward'; rather, it is that she has a different kind of future, a future that does not follow the heteronormative linearity prescribed for others, and one that it is perhaps more difficult to navigate and less clearly signposted. We can say that the backwards-forwards time structure complicates this in turn: the ring is restored to Kay, but our sense that this is Kay's ending is compromised by the fact that we still have more than three hundred pages left to read.

⁴⁶ Mitchell, 'What does it feel like to be an anachronism?', p. 85.

Nevertheless, the mysterious or even magical power that the ring assumes at the end of Kay's story sounds a note of something like hope or optimism: we notice that we never know how or when Kay first acquired the ring, and that in this moment of its 'gleaming' she does not associate it with any of the traumatic experiences with which it is connected.⁴⁷ Despite all this, there is a stronger argument still for the ring's final appearance pointing to some kind of future for Kay: the last chronological appearance of Helen in the novel is also closely associated with an object, but in a sense that is without the suggestion of hope or optimism:

As her hand slid across the cotton of Julia's nightshirt, she thought of something else – a silly thing – she thought of a pair of satin pyjamas she'd once owned, when the war was on, and then had lost. They were satin pyjamas, the colour of pearls: the most beautiful pyjamas, it seemed to her now, as she lay alone and untouched in the darkness at Julia's side; the most beautiful pyjamas she'd ever seen. (p. 158)

This is the last chronological appearance of Helen, Kay's former lover. This episode takes place towards the end of the 1947 section of the novel, although Helen, like all the characters, continues to appear as the backwards temporal structure progresses. There is the same sense here of a beautiful, precious object, but the difference is that the pyjamas are contrasted with Julia's cotton nightshirt, the very ordinariness of which is the trigger for Helen's memory. Helen's ending is thus very different from Kay's – bleaker, more final, less ambiguous. Kay's

⁴⁷ Hattie Naylor's theatrical adaptation of *The Night Watch* gives the ring an origin. In the script, Kay tells her mechanic friend Mickey that that 'the ring was in my family for years' (Sarah Waters and Hattie Naylor, *The Night Watch* (London: Bloomsbury, 2016), p. 29). This was changed to 'it was my great-grandmother's ring' at the performance I attended at the Manchester Royal Exchange Theatre on May 28th, 2016. In this adaptation, the ring is much more closely and explicitly associated with Christian Science healing: Mrs Leonard (replacing the Mr Leonard of the novel) convinces Kay, by means of a brief and impromptu healing session, that the return of the ring is a good thing, and she should put it back on. Kay puts the ring on the little finger of her left hand, which encodes it much more explicitly as a lesbian/queer object (women used to wear such a ring to discreetly signal their sexual orientation to other gay women).

ring is restored to her, and we feel quite certain that it is ‘home’, and that its movement through space and place is at an end. The pyjamas, however, are irretrievably lost, as Kay is to Helen.

Sara Ahmed’s work on the queer phenomenology of objects is useful in reading Kay’s ring. We have seen that Kaye Mitchell understands *The Night Watch*’s time structure as a kind of queering or troubling of heteronormativity, and that Jerome de Groot and Adele Jones see the ring as a symbol both of heterosexuality and Kay’s queer subjectivity. For Sara Ahmed, ‘queer’ refers to that which is oblique or which deviates from the expected straight line.⁴⁸ In terms of objects, this queering is about loss and disorientation – and it is the hands ‘that emerge as crucial sites in stories of disorientation [...] Hands hold things. They touch things. They let things go’.⁴⁹ Waters’ focus is on the movements and gestures of Kay’s hands at the point of the ring’s transfer, which is also the point at which it becomes lost to her. The queer phenomenology that Ahmed makes a case for would involve ‘bringing objects to life in their loss of place’ – in other words, exploring and celebrating the potential and possibilities objects have when they become oblique or disorientated, rather than seeing this process as a ‘loss’ in purely negative terms.⁵⁰ In this sense, the loss of Kay’s ring – which precipitates her loss of Helen to Julia – is also what comforts and rescues Viv. The ring is a lost or disorientated object during the three years it spends not in Kay’s possession, but what is it when she gets it back? Ahmed says that ‘disorientation can persist if what retreats does not return’.⁵¹ This is where the paradox comes in: if Kay’s ring has been restored to her, then what has retreated has returned, and its status as a lost or disorientated object is at an end: it has, so to speak, returned to its straight line. The unmistakable sense of resolution about Kay and her ring being reunited at the ‘end’ of the novel does make it rather more difficult to say that the ring *is* a queer object

⁴⁸ Ahmed, ‘Queer Phenomenology’, p. 164.

⁴⁹ Ahmed, ‘Queer Phenomenology’, p. 165.

⁵⁰ Ahmed, ‘Queer Phenomenology’, p. 165.

⁵¹ Ahmed, ‘Queer Phenomenology’, p. 166.

in any straightforward way: if Kay gives up the ring and it is restored to her, then it has a ‘line’ of some sort. This can perhaps be understood as the conservativising or ‘straightening’ of an object that is in some sense queer through its belonging to a queer character; as Ahmed points out, being queer and being conservative are not necessarily mutually exclusive.⁵² At the moment at which we are wrestling with these theoretical questions, we also know that we still have two thirds of the novel left to read, and that doing so is going to involve going back in time. Again, Waters resists the reader’s efforts to assign any fixed meaning to the ring, particularly in terms of the ambiguity of its association with sexual orientation.

This ring, then, evades meaning and defies categorisation, but other rings in Waters’ novels are less slippery in this sense. Whatever Kay’s ring is in *The Night Watch* – many things, and nothing – it is in part, as de Groot points out, an absence, a space, an emptiness.⁵³ Waters’ other rings are somehow heavier, weightier, more ‘there’. In *The Paying Guests*, what Lilian’s ring represents is much less elusive, much less performative, so that it is only too clear what it is and what it means:

Only when Frances’s lips began to travel to her knuckles did she draw one of the hands free – the left hand, the one with the rings on it. She set it down to steady herself against Frances’ embrace, and there was the muted tap of her wedding band, a small, chill sound in the darkness. (p. 224)

The sound of Lilian’s wedding band brings to a close her first sexual encounter with Frances, which takes place, as we have seen in Chapter 1, behind the locked door of the scullery in the

⁵² Ahmed, ‘Queer Phenomenology’, p. 172.

⁵³ de Groot, ‘Something New and a Bit Startling’, p. 65.

early hours of the morning. Notice that there are other rings on Lilian's left hand, but it is only this one that makes a sound, a 'muted', 'chill' warning of the boundary that Frances and Lilian – particularly Lilian, as a married woman – have just transgressed. The breaching of the boundaries that circumscribe the meaning of Lilian's ring is associated with the sort of tangible risk and danger that are never really associated with Kay's ring in the same way: Kay's ring is only a counterfeit or performative object in relation to heterosexual marriage, whereas Lilian's is, inescapably and unavoidably, the real thing. The unsteadiness that Lilian experiences 'against Frances' embrace' is another kind of disorientation, one that points to the way in which this encounter is also a kind of rocking or shaking of these boundaries – something more, in other words, than just transgression. This sense of something stirringly erotic being undercut with a sense of danger is further underlined when, once their relationship has been established, Frances removes not just Lilian's wedding ring, but her engagement ring as well:

'Then it'll be easy,' Frances said. 'Won't it? Look, here's how easy it will be.' And she reached for Lilian's left hand, took hold of her wedding and engagement rings, and, gently but firmly, began to draw them from their finger. Lilian gave the slightest of automatic twitches as the rings started to move, but after that she made no resistance, instead looking on in unhappy fascination as they caught on her knuckle and then came free. (p. 303)

As Kate Webb observes, Frances is 'outwardly dutiful and unremarkable, [but] veers in her interior life between fantasies of rebellion and the dread of exposure.'⁵⁴ This is one of the rare

⁵⁴ Kate Webb, 'One small brave thing', *Times Literary Supplement*, 24th October 2017
<<https://katewebb.wordpress.com/2014/11/03/sarah-waters-the-paying-guests-tls/>>
[Accessed 12th January 2018].

moments when Frances fulfils these fantasies of rebellion, and the casual, brazen way in which she removes Lilian's wedding and engagement rings marks the 'no turning back' point for the physicalisation of the women's desire for each other. Much attention is paid in the first half of the novel to the physical barriers that come between Frances and Lilian in the cramped domestic space they share – walls, doors, Leonard himself – but here the rings are continuous with and analogous to these barriers, in that they represent the ultimate boundary that the two women must breach if their relationship is to continue and develop: Lilian's marriage to Leonard. Even as Frances takes off the rings, there is a kind of doubling or reinforcing of this boundary: after their first sexual encounter, only the wedding ring itself is mentioned, but here there are two rings. The highly risky and dangerous nature of what Frances does, together with the intimacy of the contact between their hands, invests the interaction with a certain sexual tension – but the way Frances '[takes] hold' of the rings makes her coercion of Lilian seem sinister, and the rings themselves somehow heavier and larger, as though their meanings are reasserted in the moment at which they are dismantled. Grammatically, the connection between Lilian and the rings is prised apart by degrees: first they are 'her[s]', then they are 'draw[n] from *their* finger', and finally they '[start] to move' and then '[come] free', apparently continuing independently the movement that was started by Frances. Both Lilian and the rings themselves try to resist a transgression from which there can be no return, but the rings retain their meanings as markers of Lilian's engagement and marriage to Leonard even after they have been removed. The boldness and audacity of Frances' gesture is then immediately undercut by Lilian, who responds to Frances' declaration that '[y]our hand in mine, with nothing in between, [is] the simplest thing in the world' (p. 303) by telling her that she is in the early stages of pregnancy. Shortly afterwards, when Lilian goes to buy pills to induce a miscarriage, she remarks that the pharmacist makes her feel as though her wedding ring 'has come off a curtain' (p. 314). It is this that changes the meaning of the rings, rather than Frances'

removal of them. Ultimately, then, what begins as a daring act of transgression is exposed as an empty gesture in the face of such an insurmountable obstacle: Lilian has had to put the rings back on again, and the two women cannot breach the barrier of Lilian and Leonard's marriage in this way.

***The Little Stranger* and the unreliable male narrator: Caroline's ring and the plaster acorn**

In *The Little Stranger*, the wedding ring given to Caroline Ayres by Dr Faraday is a clue of a different kind. Faraday is an unreliable narrator: his is the voice of masculine reason and logic, giving rational, scientific explanations for the strange occurrences at Hundreds Hall. It is a voice that adds to the sense of the sedimentation of history that Waters achieves through the particularly dense and multi-layered intertextuality that characterises this novel. Ann Heilmann observes that Faraday's 'discourse of denial' recalls Charlotte Perkins-Gilman's *The Yellow Wallpaper* (1892), in which the narrator implies one thing by saying another.⁵⁵ Once Faraday has become engaged to Caroline Ayres, however, this voice assumes a different and more sinister dimension. When he calls Caroline a 'perfect child' and tells her that '[t]here'll be no more of this sort of thing, you know, when we are married', there is a chorus of ventriloquised voices from other controlling male narrators in literature (p. 321). These include Torvald in Ibsen's *A Doll's House* (1879), who calls Nora his 'little lark', and 'little squirrel', and Everard Wemyss in Elizabeth von Arnim's *Vera* (1921), who only ever addresses his much younger wife as 'my little girl' or 'my little baby'. The clearest of all these ventriloquised voices belongs to Maxim de Winter in Daphne du Maurier's *Rebecca* (1938), who proposes to the nameless female first-person narrator by telling her 'I'm asking you to marry me, you little fool' (p. 57).

⁵⁵ Heilmann, 'Specters of the Victorian', p. 44.

In *The Little Stranger*, the control, possession and infantilisation of a female character by a male one that are signalled by this ventriloquism are closely bound up with two key objects in the novel – the wedding ring, and a decorative plaster acorn.

These objects are part of the complex network of clues that Waters constructs about the identity or source of ‘the little stranger’ that haunts the family and the house. In Chapter 1, I discussed Ann Heilmann’s argument that Faraday’s ‘shadow-self’ is the source of the hauntings in *The Little Stranger*, with reference to the following passage:

And in the slumber I seemed to leave the car, and to press on to Hundreds [...] I saw myself cross the silvered landscape and pass like smoke through the Hundreds gate. I saw myself start along the Hundreds drive.

But then I grew panicked and confused – for the drive was changed, was queer and wrong, was impossibly lengthy and tangled with, at the end of it, nothing but darkness. (p. 473)

A number of critics acknowledge *Rebecca* as a direct influence on *The Little Stranger*.⁵⁶ The passage above is, at one level, a re-writing of the opening of du Maurier’s novel, in that it reproduces some of the language and imagery:

Then, like all dreamers, I was possessed all of a sudden with supernatural powers and passed like a spirit through the barrier before me. [...] Nature had come into her own

⁵⁶ See Lucie Armitt, *Twentieth-Century Gothic* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2011), p. 162; Monica Germanà, ‘The Death of the Lady; Haunted Garments and (Re-)Possession in *The Little Stranger*’ in *Sarah Waters: Contemporary Critical Perspectives*, ed. by Kaye Mitchell (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), p. 114; Emma Parker, ‘The Country House Revisited: Sarah Waters’ *The Little Stranger*’ in *Sarah Waters: Contemporary Critical Perspectives*, ed. by Kaye Mitchell (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), p. 111; Diana Wallace, *Female Gothic Histories* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2013), p. 187.

again and, little by little, in her stealthy, insidious way had encroached upon the drive with long, tenacious fingers. The woods, always a menace even in the past, had triumphed in the end. They crowded, dark and uncontrolled, to the borders of the drive.

(p. 1)

Waters' ventriloquising of du Maurier here provides the reader with a significant clue about the source of the haunting that has led to the symbolic and literal destruction of the family. It is implied at this point that Faraday's 'dream self' detaches completely, enters Hundreds Hall, and becomes visible to Caroline: he, then, is the 'you' that she sees before falling from the balcony. He is not aware of this himself, so he sees only darkness in his dream, triggering a sense of panic and confusion that continues right up to the final paragraph of the novel, when, alone in the empty, abandoned house, he wonders if he will see 'what Caroline saw, and recognise it, as she did' (p. 499). He sees only himself in the mirror, his face 'baffled and longing', and fails to recognise the ghost (p. 499). The idea of the spectral self, the dream in which Faraday passes through the gate, and the image of Faraday looking at himself are the things that tell us that he is the 'ghost' – but it is the key objects in the novel that signpost his jealousy, resentment and desire to possess what is not his. The novel does not quite allow us such a neat and satisfying sense of closure and resolution, however: because Faraday is an unreliable narrator, the possibility remains that his account of the dream actually describes reality, and therefore serves as the means by which he conceals the fact that he kills Caroline.

In a kind of multi-layered, simultaneous imitation of other controlling men in literature and culture, including Edward Rochester in *Jane Eyre* and Scottie Ferguson in Hitchcock's *Vertigo*, Faraday chooses Caroline's wedding clothes and ring for her, in her absence and without her knowledge. The desire for class ascent – and for Hundreds Hall itself – that lies behind his

apparent desire for Caroline is revealed in his prioritising of the ring's weight and high price over its symbolic value.⁵⁷ Subsequent references to the ring refer to the 'expensive-looking little shagreen box' it comes in (p. 443), rather than to the ring itself, pointing to Faraday's enjoyment of the ritual of buying, concealing and then presenting it, rather than his enjoyment of the idea of what it represents. When he does give the ring to Caroline, however, his performance of the role of wealthy provider – 'My first motor car had cost me less. I wrote the cheque with a nervous flourish, trying to give the impression I dispensed such sums every day' – fails spectacularly: Caroline calls off the wedding (p. 442). Faraday throws the dress and the flowers at her first, and then, finally, the ring:

I'm ashamed to say that I threw it hard, meaning to hit her. She dodged away, and the ring went out through the open window. I thought it went cleanly, but it must have glanced against one of the glass doors as it went. There came a sound like an air-pistol firing, astonishingly loud in the Hundreds silence; and a crack appeared, as if from nowhere, in one of the handsome old panes. (p. 450)

The crack that appears in the window is also a crack in Faraday's calm, detached narration – one of many that open up as the novel progresses. The sudden, violent impulse that he is unable to repress, and which he immediately regrets giving vent to, is petulant and childish; the damage to the window further implicates Faraday in the decay and destruction of the house that began some decades earlier. In this way, the ring is implicitly linked to the plaster acorn that he steals from a decorative border on a visit to the house as a boy – when he is, quite literally, a 'little stranger'. Faraday, narrating as an adult looking back on this key moment from his childhood, recalls this memory in the opening chapter of the novel:

⁵⁷ Germanà, *The Death of the Lady*, p. 124.

I worked my fingers around one of the acorns and tried to prise it from its setting: and when that failed to release it, I got out my pen knife and dug away with that. I didn't do it in a spirit of vandalism. I wasn't a spiteful or destructive boy. It was simply that, in admiring the house, I wanted to possess a piece of it – or rather, as if the admiration itself [...] entitled me to it. (p. 3)

There is a persistence, and a subtle violence, to the way Faraday forces the removal of the acorn that foreshadows his slow, sinister and quietly relentless insinuation into the Ayres family and Hundreds Hall. The acorn resists his attempts to remove it, just as Caroline resists and then gives in to Faraday's desire to possess her and the house by agreeing, albeit temporarily, to marry him; the correlation drawn between the theft of the acorn and sexual harassment or assault (attraction equals entitlement) also encodes the acorn as a specifically female – even breast-shaped – object.⁵⁸ Claire O'Callaghan also finds something maternal – or even Oedipal – in the symbolism of the acorn, arguing that Faraday's mother's failure to punish him sufficiently means that he '[fails] to learn a valuable moral lesson about possession at a young and impressionable age, leaving him with a sense of entitlement' that continues into his adulthood.⁵⁹ Similarly, Emma Parker argues that Faraday 'attacks what he is formally denied' by 'acting out an unconscious wish to spoil or destroy what he cannot possess'.⁶⁰ This is signalled in part by Faraday's transgression of a barrier – the 'rope[s]' or 'ribbon[s]' that bar access to rooms when children are visiting the house for Empire Day (p. 1). The rope or ribbon that Faraday breaches to steal the acorn is, however, a barrier that is not a barrier: it is flimsy and insubstantial and easily transgressed, like the barriers of social class and status that do not

⁵⁸ Parker, 'The Country House Revisited', p. 106.

⁵⁹ O'Callaghan, *Gender and Sexual Politics*, p. 133.

⁶⁰ Claire O'Callaghan, *Gender and Sexual Politics* (London: Bloomsbury, 2017), p. 106.

protect the Ayres family from Faraday's destructive influence. These barriers, symbolised by the brick walls of the house, are even less substantial than ropes and ribbons: the signs of decay that Faraday observes when he first returns to Hundreds Hall as an adult – 'the worn red brick, the cockled window glass, the weathered sandstone edgings' – make the house look 'blurred and slightly uncertain – like an ice [...] beginning to melt in the sun' (p.1).

It is ultimately the post-war decline of the aristocratic class, expressed here as a kind of melting or giving way rather than a crumbling or breaking, that makes possible Faraday's slow destruction of the Ayres family, even if his own dreams of class ascent, like Pip's in Dickens' *Great Expectations*, 'come to nothing'.⁶¹ The final appearance of this ring is at Caroline's funeral, when Faraday holds it inside his pocket and repeatedly turns it in his fingers as her coffin is lowered. There is, then, a direct connection made not only between the acorn and the ring, but between the ring and Caroline's death – for which, it is clearly implied, Faraday's spectral self is responsible. For Helen Davies, the acorn has significance in the narrative that extends far beyond its initial appearance:

[Faraday's] wielding of the knife is couched in terms of the desire to maintain the Hall's beauty for himself – an ironic foreshadowing of the surgeon's knife that will reconstruct Gillian Baker-Hyde's damaged face – yet he fails to see that his theft is also an act of mutilation. In addition, his choice of vocabulary to express this obsession equates his desire for possession with disability. It is a 'blind' devotion that motivates such destruction, which suggests that his subsequent status as dispassionate medical observer of the occupants of Hundreds Hall is not particularly secure.⁶²

⁶¹ Heilmann, 'Specters of the Victorian', p. 44.

⁶² Helen Davies, 'Written on the Body: Wounded Men and Ugly Women in *The Little Stranger*' in *Sarah Waters and Contemporary Feminisms*, ed. by Adele Jones and Claire O'Callaghan (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), p. 163.

Thus the acorn is the motif that ties together much of Faraday's subsequent behaviour: as Joanne Bishton argues, it 'remains ever-present in the story, constantly fingered by Faraday in his pocket'.⁶³ Critical responses generally focus on the acorn itself, so it is interesting that Davies also underlines the significance of the knife with which he removes it, and that she makes the perceptive connection between his boyhood knife and the knife with which he performs emergency surgery on the daughter of a local family when the Ayres' dog savages her. In both cases, the knife is wielded not with obvious, forceful violence, but with an insidious subtlety, even precision, reflecting the way in which Faraday slowly secures the family's complicity in their own downfall.

Domestic and personal objects in *The Little Stranger* and *The Night Watch*: The fragments of history and memory

Later in the novel, there is a further association made between objects and the fracturing of Faraday's carefully maintained rationality. The rings in *The Night Watch*, *The Little Stranger* and *The Paying Guests* are freighted with meaning, but Waters suggests in all these novels that the nostalgic or sentimental preservation of objects risks emptying them of their historical meaning and significance. When Faraday finds an old biscuit tin full of mementoes from his childhood – his birth certificate, a lock of his baby hair, school reports, newspaper cuttings – he encounters them as 'odd little fragments' from his past, rather than a means by which complete and coherent memories can be accessed (p. 37). The tin contains a mixture of written texts and objects, dislocated from their historical and personal contexts and 'all mixed up, so

⁶³ Joanne Bishton, "'Queering' the speaking subject in Sarah Waters' *The Little Stranger*' in *Cross-Gendered Literary Voices: Appropriating, Resisting, Embracing* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), p. 211.

that a torn newspaper cutting announcing my graduation from medical school had snagged itself on a letter from my first headmaster' (p. 38). There is a sense here, as in Waters' neo-Victorian fiction, of the simultaneous existence of different historical periods, and of the undermining of the notion of continuity between past and present. Faraday's encounter with the memory fragments in the biscuit tin brings him into an unwelcome confrontation with his own past, producing the realisation that the considerable sacrifices his parents made for him have not brought about the class ascent he aspires to: he is merely 'a good, ordinary doctor', not distinguished or remarkable in any way (p. 39). He then '[lies] down among the photographs and fragments on the bed' and pictures Hundreds Hall, with its 'cool, fragrant spaces, the light it held like wine in a glass' and 'the people inside it as they must be now' (p. 39-40). This is the first time the reader is given a sense that a crack or fissure has appeared in the apparently smooth surface of Faraday's rational voice, through which emerge the jealousy and resentment that trigger his obsessive, sinister, irrational behaviour. At the end of the novel, with Caroline dead and his dreams of class ascent in ruins, Faraday assembles 'a queer little collection' of objects from his time at Hundreds: 'A week before, they would have told a story, with myself as the hero of the tale [...] I looked to them for meaning, and was defeated' (p. 467). Again, there is the suggestion that such 'unhappy fragments', when dislocated from their contexts and invested with a sentimental nostalgia, cannot tell us about history and the past (p. 467).

Elsewhere in the novel, there is a preoccupation with domestic objects as what Katharina Boehm calls 'silent reminders of forgotten or repressed historical knowledge'.⁶⁴ This has a clear class dimension, so that objects associated with the aristocratic or upper class become anachronisms. As the house crumbles around them, Caroline and Mrs Ayres escape from the

⁶⁴ Boehm, 'Historiography and the Material Imagination', p. 253.

present and seek refuge in their memories, engaging in a quite conscious and deliberate act of remembering Hundreds Hall as it was as they assess the extensive damage to the saloon caused by a water leak. This culminates in Caroline coming across a collection of old gramophone records, long forgotten: she intends to throw them away, but plays them instead, listening to ‘the hiss and crackle of the shellac’, ‘the boom of the orchestra’, and ‘the singer’s voice [...] like some lovely, fragile creature’ [...] ‘breaking free of thorns’. (p. 296). The record ends to give way to a different sound: that of ‘drips of water tumbling from the ruined ceiling into buckets and bowls’ (p. 296). Thus the present intrudes on a past that can never be recaptured, and Waters again warns against the kind of sepia-toned sentimentalising of the past that is often associated with tactile, sensory encounters with historical objects.

In contrast to the out-of-date irrelevance of the Ayres’ gramophone records, objects associated with the domestic or working class are animated and mobile, often in a way that is violent and vengeful. Roderick’s collar, cufflinks and shaving mirror play a ‘malicious game of hide-and-seek with him’, and his shaving mirror walks towards him before hurling itself at his head.⁶⁵ Rather than finding these events genuinely frightening, Roderick is instead acutely aware that they expose the fragility of his class position and security: ‘“there I was, the host, supposedly, the master of Hundreds! – keeping everyone waiting, chasing round the room like a twit, because I owned one decent stand-up collar!”’ (p. 158). For Monica Germanà, this reveals his ‘self-conscious paranoia about the mismatch of class and ownership that his lack of adequate clothing denotes’.⁶⁶ It can also be argued that these objects are working-class objects as well as upper-class ones: in the heyday of Hundreds Hall, the master of the house – then Roderick’s father, Colonel Ayres – would have had a valet to help him dress. The collar, cufflinks and

⁶⁵ Boehm, ‘Historiography and the Material Imagination’, p. 254.

⁶⁶ Germanà, ‘The Death of the Lady’, p. 120.

mirror may now represent the declining fortunes of the land-owning class, but historically they are associated with working-class labour. Similarly, the speaking tube, which would once have enabled communication between the nursery staff and the cook, becomes another source of anxiety and terror in the house when it begins to sound its whistle after fifteen years of disuse. Katharina Boehm observes that this and other domestic objects in the novel ‘become visible in the very moment at which they stop working properly, thus contesting their status as silent inanimate servants of their proprietors’.⁶⁷ This is about class rebellion and resurgence at one level, but Boehm also argues that there is also a sense in Waters’ twentieth-century-set novels of the way in which, according to Bill Brown, an object becomes a ‘thing’ – that is, something that we notice and respond to, rather than forget and ignore – only when it stops working properly.⁶⁸

[T]he suddenness with which things seem to assert their presence and power: you cut your finger on a sheet of paper, you trip over some toy [...] They are occasions of contingency – the chance interruption – that disclose a physicality of things. [...] The story of objects asserting themselves as things, then, is the story of a changed relation to the human subject and thus the story of how the thing really names less an object than a particular subject-object relation.⁶⁹

The objects that torment the inhabitants of Hundreds Hall are benign and unremarkable only until they become implicated in the haunting of the house and family, at which point they do indeed ‘assert their presence and power’. This brings about the ‘changed relation to the human subject’ that in turn discloses the contingency of these domestic objects: in one historical period

⁶⁷ Boehm, ‘Historiography and the Material Imagination’, p. 255.

⁶⁸ Boehm, ‘Historiography and the Material Imagination’, p. 245.

⁶⁹ Bill Brown, ‘Thing Theory’, *Critical Enquiry* 28 (2001), p. 3.

the collar, cufflinks and shaving mirror are markers of class supremacy and superiority, while in another they precipitate Roderick Ayres' psychological and physical collapse. In other words, an object becomes a thing – something that is disruptive or uncanny or malevolent – only when the subject-object relation with which it is bound up changes. In terms of the domestic objects in *The Little Stranger*, this process is presented as an inevitable and irreversible class upheaval that cannot be resisted or held back: when Faraday contemplates leaving a traumatised Mrs Ayres alone for a moment, he takes in the objects that are near her – ‘the coals in the hearth, the pokers, the tongs, the glass tumblers, the mirrors, the ornaments’ – and realises that they are all ‘brutal and brittle, suddenly, and capable of harm’ (p. 394). What he does not realise is that he is the subject in this particular subject-object relation, and that he has turned these items from benign, innocent domestic objects into violent and vengeful *things*. This preoccupation with the relationship between objects and those who own or use them is also present in *The Night Watch*, and while the objects in the earlier novel are similarly charged with meaning, they are never as violent or vengeful as those in *The Little Stranger*. We first encounter Duncan as a young man recently released from prison, living with his former prison guard, and working in a factory. In the early stages of the novel, it is through Duncan's fascination with the antique objects he collects that we can most clearly observe Waters' interest in objects as texts in which history is sedimented, and through which encounters with the past are possible:

‘Look at this,’ he said. It was a little copperish jug, with a dent in its side. [...] ‘I think it must be eighteenth century. Imagine ladies, V, taking tea, pouring cream from this! It would’ve been silvered then, of course. Do you see where the plating’s come off?’ He showed her the traces of silver at the join of the handle. [...] He turned the jug in his hands, delighted with it. It looked like a piece of rubbish to Viv. (p. 26)

Again, there is the sense here of the contingency of the subject-object relation. Duncan has, as Katharina Boehm observes, a significant emotional and intellectual investment in an object that his sister Viv sees as meaningless.⁷⁰ This interest and engagement is constructed around the past lives of the copper jug, rather than its present usefulness, so that the markers of age, wear and damage become the primary source of Duncan's investment in and attachment to the object: the clear evidence that the jug is merely silver-plated makes it more rather than less valuable from Duncan's perspective. Boehm also argues that 'Duncan's imaginative investment in his collectables [...] yields a model for the reader's engagement with the objects of *The Night Watch*'.⁷¹ This does rather overlook the way in which the life and relevance with which he invests them is offset against the 'dead, dead, dead' objects of Mr Mundy's house: the 'flowers of wax and pieces of coral under spotted glass domes' and the 'yellow, exhausted photographs' (p. 27). The novel does imply that Duncan's fascination with historical bric-a-brac is a symptom of his trauma after the suicide of his friend Alec and his time spent in prison, and of his inability to move beyond the past. Rather than just a means by which encounters with history are possible and pleasurable, Duncan's interactions with his objects can instead be understood, in Sara Ahmed's terms, as orientations towards objects that affect what Duncan does and how he inhabits space:

In perceiving the object as an object, I perceive the object *in a certain way* [...] In perceiving [objects] in this way or that, I also take a position upon them, *which in turn gives me a position*. [...] Turning towards an object turns 'me' [...] even if that 'turn' does not involve a conscious act of interpretation or judgement.⁷²

⁷⁰ Boehm, 'Historiography and the Material Imagination', p. 246.

⁷¹ Boehm, 'Historiography and the Material Imagination', p. 245.

⁷² Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology*, pp. 27-28. Italics in original.

Duncan's 'turn' is towards historical artefacts, rather than objects associated with the present. His interpretations and judgements of the objects he collects are quite conscious; the 'certain way' in which he perceives them is to do with their status as objects of historical interest rather than monetary value. The question of how the objects 'turn' Duncan is a little more ambiguous: they make him seem less incongruous in the 'dead' space he inhabits, but they also point to his temporal and spatial disorientation and dislocation, almost as though he has become as decontextualised as the objects themselves. Rather, then, than providing 'a model for the reader's engagement with the objects of *The Night Watch*', these objects are, like the ring and the pyjamas, associated with a kind of haunting, one in which objects from the past return (either literally or in memory) to facilitate a way of resisting the present and the future.⁷³ Ahmed goes on to say that to simply look at an object is to erase 'the 'signs' of history, to 'apprehend the object as simply there, as given in its sensuous certainty', instead of as something that has arrived; the sedimentation of history that is achieved through the work of previous generations is 'the condition of arrival for future generations'.⁷⁴ Duncan's perception of his objects as being sedimented with the lives and histories of their previous owners thus makes clear their process of 'getting there', and implies again that it is not possible – or desirable – to read history on the surface of an object.

There is a sense in which apprehending Duncan's objects *only* as historical artefacts may not be helpful at all. If we strip them of their historical associations and look instead at what Duncan is actually doing, we can argue that, in Andrew Gorman-Murray's terms, his collecting of objects is a kind of material home-making practice. Gorman-Murray contends that:

⁷³ Boehm, 'Historiography and the Material Imagination', p. 245.

⁷⁴ Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology*, p. 28.

Material home-making practices are a key means of reconciling fractured or fragmented identities [...] various meaningful possessions embody different fragments of self, and their juxtaposition at home not only (re)unites these diverse identity fragments, but materially embeds a ‘whole’ self within domestic space. [...] [T]his is particularly so for those whose sense of self includes subjectivities which are marginalised.⁷⁵

It is clear that Waters presents Duncan as a character whose identity is fractured and fragmented, and for whom his meaningful possessions – his historical objects – are a means by which he attempts to piece together these fragments. Duncan is not presented as a gay man who identifies as such in the twenty-first century sense, but he is presented as having a sense of self that includes a marginalised subjectivity. This perspective lends credibility to the argument that Duncan’s antique-collecting is a symptom of trauma, and undermines the notion that Waters advocates his engagement with historical objects as a model that readers should follow when engaging with the other objects in the novel. The most compelling of these is a pair of silk pyjamas given to Helen by Kay, quite different from Duncan’s antique bric-a-brac in that rather than being a metonymic historical object, they are invested with the seductive, sensuous qualities associated with queer desire in the present.

Silk, ink and quicksilver: the pyjamas in *The Night Watch* and the collapsing of boundaries between bodies, objects and buildings

Rebecka Taves Sheffield shares Gorman-Murray’s interest in the home as a site of inquiry and intervention, also arguing that, because domestic space is understood in heteronormative terms,

⁷⁵ Andrew Gorman-Murray, ‘Reconciling self: gay men and lesbians using domestic materiality for identity management’, *Social and Cultural Geography*, 9 (2008), p. 284.

there are particular issues and implications around domestic space and objects that are inhabited and owned by people who live outside these structures.⁷⁶ In the 1947 section of *The Night Watch*, Julia and Helen are living together as a couple; they keep their relationship secret, worried that the heterosexual couple living in the flat below will overhear something that will betray the fact that they are lovers (p. 46). Waters' re-writing of the home as a non-heteronormative space can be understood as an extension of her wider historiographic intervention, in which she seeks to both map and contribute to the project of introspection that is a precondition of queer subjectivity.⁷⁷ There are parallels here with the work of Sheffield, who asserts that the collecting and archiving of lesbian domestic objects is a form of archival intervention, both in terms of creating an archive where one does not exist, and in rejecting existing (patriarchal and heteronormative) archival methods. This archive, which records intimate lesbian domestic objects, 'remains dynamic in its meaning and importance' to reveal 'how history does not just happen but is created and recreated over time'.⁷⁸ The pair of satin pyjamas that Kay gives to Helen in *The Night Watch* is the most intimate and sensual of all the objects in the novel, and its journey through time and space illustrates precisely how history takes shape and effect through what Lynne Pearce calls a 'will to repetition'.⁷⁹

Claire O'Callaghan explores the capacity of silent material objects to 'speak' or inscribe connections between women in Waters' novels. Referring mostly to the neo-Victorian novels, she argues that Waters draws on a long tradition of female writing when using pearls to symbolise love, passion and sexual pleasure between women. In *The Night Watch*, the pearl-

⁷⁶ Rebecka Taves Sheffield, 'The Bedside Table Archives: Archive Intervention and Lesbian Domestic Culture', *Radical History Review* 120 (2014), p. 110.

⁷⁷ Laura Doan and Sarah Waters, 'Making up lost time: contemporary lesbian writing and the invention of history', in *Territories of Desire in Queer Culture: Refiguring Contemporary Boundaries*, ed. by David Alderson and Linda Anderson (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000), p. 12.

⁷⁸ Sheffield, 'The Bedside Table Archives', p. 114.

⁷⁹ Pearce, 'Romance, Trauma and Repetition', p. 82.

coloured satin pyjamas that Kay gives to Helen are closely linked to memory and remembering: the reader first learns of them through Helen's memories, but, as O'Callaghan points out, does not encounter them in the fictive present until later in the novel. In this sense, the sensuous, silky, fluid materiality of the pyjamas means that Kay can later associate her memories of them with her memories of Helen's body, and of their sexual relationship. This is another way in which 'Waters deploys pearls to mark the durability and visibility of lesbian passion' – but, as we have seen and shall see, the pearl-coloured pyjamas are also closely linked to lesbian betrayal and unfaithfulness.⁸⁰

The first mention of the pyjamas in the novel is associated with loss: Helen remembers their pearl-coloured, sensuous beauty just as her relationship with Julia is deteriorating irretrievably. O'Callaghan argues that the memory of the pyjamas, which the reader later learns were lost three years earlier in the destruction in a bombing raid of the house Kay and Helen shared, is 'invested with overtones of romantic nostalgia' that 'embody the love that Kay held for Helen'.⁸¹ They assume this status for Helen only after both the pyjamas and Kay have been lost. Kay first purchases the pyjamas at considerable expense from 'those beastly black-market boys' (p. 254). On a superficial level, this underlines their specialness and rarity, but their status as stolen goods also foreshadows the way in which Helen will tarnish their legitimacy and meaning as a signifier of lesbian desire and romance. The slippage between what the pyjamas mean to Kay and what they mean to Helen is signalled when they are unwrapped first by Kay, and then by Helen:

⁸⁰ O'Callaghan, 'The equivocal symbolism of pearls', p. 30.

⁸¹ Claire O'Callaghan, 'The equivocal symbolism of pearls in the novels of Sarah Waters' *Contemporary Women's Writing* 6 (2012), p. 30.

She had picked up her bag, and was opening it now to bring out a flat rectangular box. The box was pink, with a silk bow across it. [...] She set the box flat upon her lap – paused a moment, for effect – then carefully lifted off the lid. Inside were layers of silver paper. She put them back, and revealed a satin pyjama-suit, the colour of pearls. (p. 256)

She'd removed the lid at last and, the box being tilted against her knees, the folds of paper inside had parted and the pyjama-suit, like quicksilver, had come tumbling fluidly out. She gazed at it for a moment without moving; then, as if reluctantly, she caught hold of the jacket and lifted it up. (p. 311)

The pyjamas are unwrapped twice, and from 'layers' of paper, underlining the connection the novel makes between objects and the repetition and sedimentation of history. In the first extract, when Kay shows her friend Mickey the pyjamas, there is a sense of ceremony, even drama: the way Kay builds up to the moment at which they are revealed echoes Viv's unwrapping of the ring earlier in the novel, and implies the same kind of value and rarity. Both the ring and the pyjamas symbolise bonds between women, and are bound up with ideas about the exchange and commodification of objects; the difference here is that Kay's purchase of the pyjamas (illegal, risky, difficult, time-consuming) is just one manifestation of the trait that most clearly defines her as a character: her conspicuous gallantry. In this sense, the giving of the pyjamas genders their relationship, with Kay and Helen occupying butch and femme roles. This ties into the Sapphic culture of the time, before the post-1980s climate in which the idea of butch and femme had lost currency, and draws a parallel between Kay and Stephen Gordon in *The Well of Loneliness*.⁸² Kay first meets and falls in love with Helen when she rescues her

⁸² Sue Ellen Case, 'Towards a Butch-Femme Aesthetic', *Discourse* 11 (1989), pp. 55-73.

from a bombed-out building, ‘fresh and unmarked’ (p. 503); Helen tells Julia that Kay makes “‘an absurd kind of heroine of you’” (p. 275); Mickey tells Kay that she has “‘a gallantry complex’” (p. 257); throughout the 1944 and 1941 sections of the novel, Kay’s job as an ambulance driver casts her in the role of hero and rescuer. Her purchase and presentation of the pyjamas in this role signals that the ideas about exchange that circulate around them are different from those that circulate around the ring: the ring is exchanged between Kay and Viv and back again, so that its restorative, redemptive properties work on both women; the pyjamas are given to Helen by Kay, and then lost. Thus the relationship between Helen and Kay is transactional, rather than mutually beneficial: the reader understands that the pyjamas are part of a bargaining system in which Helen – who is not asleep in bed wearing the pyjamas when the bomb destroys the house because she is out with Julia instead – has to return Kay’s love, whether she feels it genuinely or not.

Waters’ use of imagery when Helen takes the lid off the box establishes a connection between the pyjamas and ideas elsewhere in Waters’ work about the melting or dissolving of boundaries between physical structures (like objects and buildings) and the body. Katharina Boehm argues that *The Night Watch* and *The Little Stranger* share ‘an intense fascination with the idea that history seeps into material artefacts and buildings’.⁸³ Waters achieves this sense of seeping through recurring metaphors and similes that imply the fluid, liquid properties of solid objects and structures. Here, Helen’s casual, careless response to Kay’s gallant gesture means that the pyjamas ‘[tumble] fluidly out’, ‘like quicksilver’, instead of being unwrapped slowly and carefully, as they are when Kay first shows them to Mickey. The silky, satiny materiality of the pyjamas is such that it seems quite accurate, in a descriptive sense, to represent them in these terms, but this simile echoes other similar imagery in all three novels in which buildings

⁸³ Boehm, ‘Historiography and the material imagination’, p. 251.

are described as having liquid or fluid properties. Elsewhere in *The Night Watch*, boundaries between bodies, garments and buildings merge to the extent that they become indistinct:

[Julia] had seen, lit up by the second flash, a sort of baffle-wall that had been built across the entrance to an office or bank. The space it made was deep, jute-scented, impossibly dark: she moved into it, as if passing through a curtain of ink, and drew Helen in after her. [...] [Their] two opened coats came together to make what seemed to Helen to be a second baffle-wall, darker even than the first. (p. 374)

The language used here collapses the distinction between the boundaries that separate Helen and Kay from their clothing, from the structure in which they conceal themselves, and from each other. O'Callaghan argues that the pyjamas stand in for Helen's body in her absence from Kay.⁸⁴ Similarly, the 'two opened coats' merge with the bodies of Julia and Helen, and with the temporary building formed by the baffle-wall. The way Julia enters the space 'as if passing through a curtain of ink' consolidates the link between the 'quicksilver' pyjamas and Helen's infidelity, and further undermines the idea that buildings can retain their spatial fixity and solidity during wartime – not only because of the ever-present threat of destruction, but also because the war has produced a similar fluidity in the codes and conventions that govern sexual relationships and practices.

⁸⁴ O'Callaghan, 'The equivocal symbolism of pearls', p. 32.

The gypsy caravan in *The Paying Guests*: Frances and Lilian as Vita Sackville-West and Violet Trefusis

In *The Paying Guests*, the boundaries of propriety and convention that separate Frances and Lilian start to come down during a drunken game of strip Snakes and Ladders that also involves Leonard. Afterwards, ‘brav[ing] the tilt of the bed’, tormented by guilt and regret, Frances pictures Lilian’s ‘silk stocking coming down, over and over again’ (p. 164). The image, with its sense of repetition and replay, is deliberately cinematic, and points to Waters’ continuing preoccupation with the idea of history and time as cyclical or non-linear, and with silky or fluid materiality as a marker of risky, high-stakes passion and desire. Frances’ fixation with the silk stocking also anticipates the key object in this novel: a china gypsy caravan. The caravan, like the ring and the pyjamas in *The Night Watch*, stands for the bond between two women; the difference, in terms of history and historiography, is that it is the symbol through which Waters takes up a particular thread in lesbian and feminist history and writing, that which is concerned with gypsies and gypsy culture. Specifically, the gypsy caravan, along with other details in the novel – a letter, certain lines of dialogue, Lilian’s clothes and possessions – invokes the passionate affair between Vita Sackville-West and Violet Trefusis, which reached its point of high melodrama in the early 1920s, exactly the period in which *The Paying Guests* is set. This close association between a particular object and a very specific aspect of lesbian history is an important development in Waters’ project of historiographic intervention: in this sense, the gypsy caravan is the most densely layered and sedimented of all the historical objects in Waters’ novels, particularly in view of the fact that the ring, the pyjamas, and the acorn articulate more abstract *ideas* about time, history and memory, rather than evoking specific events or figures in history.

Various biographers have highlighted Vita Sackville-West's fascination with her Spanish ancestry (her maternal grandmother, Pepita, was a Spanish dancer), and the way in which she and others attributed her gypsy qualities to this dark, fiery sexuality in her DNA.⁸⁵ Kirstie Blair shows how Violet Trefusis played on Sackville-West's interest in her Spanish lineage by convincing her that their passion was 'natural and inevitable given the gypsy blood in her veins'.⁸⁶ Trefusis' letters to Vita, Blair argues, confirm the extent to which the two women elaborated and embroidered the gypsy myth to provide 'an intense fantasy of escape and a way of referring to an illicit but natural sexuality'.⁸⁷ The letter to which Blair refers in particular is one composed by Violet on a train in September 1918, in which, addressing Vita by her secret pet name, she urges her to abandon the trappings of upper-class marriage and motherhood and 'come away' with her, 'when they're all asleep in their snug white beds'; 'You, my poor Mitya, they've taken you and they've burnt your caravan'.⁸⁸ Thus the image of the gypsy caravan, with all its associations of freedom, independence and the rejection of wealth and possessions, is one of the key motifs around which the two women construct their fantasy of escape. Kirstie Blair shows how writings by Sackville-West and Violet Trefusis associate the gypsy with same-sex fantasies and desire, the blurring of boundaries between the familiar and strange, and the resisting of categorisation – all of which, as we have seen, are hallmarks of Waters' fiction; it is only in *The Paying Guests* that these ideas become tied up with the figure of the gypsy in particular.

⁸⁵ See, for example: Victoria Glendinning, *Vita: The Life of Vita Sackville-West* (London: Penguin, 1984); Nicolson (1973); Matthew Dennison, *Behind the Mask: The Life of Vita Sackville-West* (London: William Collins, 2014); Juliet Nicolson, *A House Full of Daughters* (London: Chatto and Windus, 2016).

⁸⁶ Kirstie Blair, 'Gypsies and Lesbian Desire: Vita Sackville-West, Violet Trefusis, and Virginia Woolf', *Twentieth-Century Literature*, 50 (2004), p. 151.

⁸⁷ Blair, 'Gypsies and Lesbian Desire' p. 150.

⁸⁸ Mitchell A Leaska and John Philips (eds.), *Violet to Vita: The Letters of Violet Trefusis to Vita Sackville-West* (London: Methuen, 1989), p. 93.

When Lilian and Leonard Barber first move into the house Frances shares with her mother, Lilian fills their sitting room with bright, garish colour: a ‘pseudo-Persian rug’, ‘a fringed Indian shawl’, a ‘wicker birdcage’ with a ‘silk-and-feather parrot’ inside it (p. 19). At this point in the novel, this is about Lilian’s tacky, kitsch possessions clashing with the more reserved and sober décor favoured by Frances and her mother, but later, when the attraction between Lilian and Frances is growing, it retrospectively encodes Lilian as exotic and daring in terms of her sexuality. This exoticism, which Kirstie Blair notes is particularly associated with the free, unconventional sexuality of gypsy culture, is more specifically located in gypsy-related objects as the novel progresses. It is a tambourine that first introduces the first tentative suggestion of a connection between the two women:

The tambourine had trailing ribbons and a gypsy look about it. Gypsyish, too, was Mrs Barber’s costume: the fringed skirt, the Turkish slippers; her hair was done up in a red silk scarf. Frances paused, not wanting to disturb her. [...]

‘You have exotic tastes, I think.’

‘Len says I’m like a savage. That I ought to live in the jungle. I just like things that have come from other places.’

And after all, thought Frances, what was wrong with that? She gave the tambourine a shake, tapped her fingers across its drumskin. (p. 36)

Here, in Kirstie Blair’s terms, Lilian is cast as Violet Trefusis. Blair contends that Violet’s powerful fantasy of herself as a gypsy was at once both conservative and radical: the ‘passionate heterosexuality’ of the gypsy woman offered a form of protection from the consequences of deviating from appropriate femininity, while at the same time highlighting

‘[Violet’s] deliberate *performance* of an ultrafeminine role.’⁸⁹ Thus Lilian’s hyperfeminine dress here signals her otherness, specifically in terms of sex and sexuality; it is also part of a literal performance, in which she dresses up and inhabits the role of a gypsy, or even a ‘savage’. Leonard’s use of this term to describe Lilian aligns his perspective on the gypsy with that of anthropological studies of the time, which, as Blair notes, saw the gypsy as primitive and savage.⁹⁰ In this way, Waters signposts the future direction these relationships will take: Lilian and Frances will fall in love, and Leonard will be excluded. Frances’ implicit disapproval of Leonard’s reported comment – ‘after all, what was wrong with that?’ – compels her to take the tambourine from Lilian, shake it, and ‘[tap] her fingers across its drumskin’ in a gesture that is unmistakably, albeit subtly, sexual and erotic. It is an exchange, albeit a temporary one, of an object between two women; in the moment of exchange the object is invested with the first suggestion of their mutual love and desire, something that is underscored shortly afterwards when Frances thinks of Lilian and pictures her with the tambourine. In this way, the tambourine acts as a kind of rehearsal or preparation for the exchange of an object in the other direction: Frances’ gift to Lilian of the gypsy caravan itself.

The elaborate fantasy of freedom and escape that Violet Trefusis and Vita Sackville-West construct around the idea of themselves as gypsies, both in Violet’s letters to Vita and in Vita’s novels *Heritage* (1919) and *Challenge* (1924), is implicitly referenced by Waters early in Frances and Lilian’s affair. Lilian tells Frances that they are ‘like the gypsy king and queen’ and ‘could go miles and miles from Camberwell, and live in a caravan in a wood, and pick berries, and catch rabbits, and kiss, and kiss’ (p. 245). It is this conversation that prompts Frances to buy the china caravan for Lilian a few weeks later. When she presents her gift, Lilian

⁸⁹ Blair, ‘Gypsies and Lesbian Desire’, p. 146. Italics mine.

⁹⁰ Blair, ‘Gypsies and Lesbian Desire’, p. 142.

tells her that “I shall look at this when we’re apart,” and ‘I’ll be with you, Frances’” (p. 255). Lilian puts the caravan on the mantelpiece, and Frances feels a mixture of ‘excitement and disquiet’ at the thought of Leonard seeing it every day and not knowing what it means, or who it is from (p. 255). Thus the china caravan is, like Kay’s ring and the pyjamas, associated with the bonds between women, but also with an element of risk. There is a key difference here between Violet and Vita and Lilian and Frances: for Waters’ characters, the gypsy fantasy of escape and freedom really is just a fantasy: neither of the women has the means to make it reality. Violet and Vita, by contrast, did escape together to Paris, albeit temporarily. Their circumstances – money and means, their movement in Bohemian and artistic circles where a certain degree of freedom of sexual expression was condoned, Vita’s husband Harold’s tacit acceptance of her lesbian affairs – were not the same as those of Lilian and Frances, who Waters presents as being much more confined financially, culturally and socially. The permanent and unavoidable distinction between fantasy and reality is signalled by Waters near the end of the novel, when, during the investigation into Leonard’s murder, Frances goes into Lilian’s room, and sees the tambourine and the caravan as ‘nothing but a lot of old junk’. She picks up the caravan, and notices for the first time that it is ‘hollow, with a hole in the bottom’ (p. 531). She even considers smashing it, in case it incriminates her and Lilian. Ultimately, the object has become meaningless not because of Leonard’s murder, but because, like Vita Sackville-West – who eventually returned to her husband and children – Frances has wavered in her commitment to her lover.

The other significant object in *The Paying Guests* is the stand ashtray with which Lilian murders Leonard. Kay’s ring, Helen’s pyjamas and the china caravan are all explicitly invested with narrative meaning from their first appearance in their respective novels. As we have seen, the first time we see Kay’s ring in *The Night Watch*, Viv retrieves it from its secret hiding place

with great ceremony. Helen's pyjamas are described in a way that emphasises their luxury and rarity, and, in *The Paying Guests*, the china caravan is an important token of the love between Frances and Lilian, and a link with a noteworthy episode in lesbian history. The stand-ashtray is rather different. Unlike these other objects, it is not a marker of bonds between women, nor does it move through time and space so that it becomes sedimented with the histories of those who own and handle it. Its vital role in the narrative of *The Paying Guests* is not flagged up in the way that Waters clearly signals that the ring, the pyjamas and the china caravan are important objects. This is partly because Waters' most recent novel makes so much use of the conventions of detective fiction: the stand ashtray is a clue, one that – as I have explained – is cataphorically smuggled into the opening chapter of the novel, so that only at the moment of Leonard's death do we apprehend its significance.

The stand-ashtray makes its first appearance in a long list of items the Barbers unload from their van to bring into the Wrays' house (p. 6). This is the first of several small signposts that lead up to the dramatic centre of the story, when the stand-ashtray's function as a narrative device is revealed. When this point is reached, Leonard has discovered the abortion and the affair, and has his hands round Frances' throat. Frances hears a sound 'like a cricket bat meeting a wet ball' and does not realise for a few seconds what has happened:

And even when she turned and saw Lilian, a few feet behind him, something grasped in her hands like a club – what was it? The ashtray! The stand-ashtray! – even then, it didn't occur to her that Lilian or the ashtray had anything to do with his fall. She thought only of getting away from him before he could rise and grab her again. (p. 336)

Up until the beginning of this episode, the stand ashtray has been represented as just one of the many kitsch, tacky objects that Lilian and Leonard have distributed around their rooms in the Barbers' house. We have seen, in relation to the ring, the pyjamas and the china caravan, how the meanings of objects in Waters' novels shift and morph in a subtle way. Here, the meaning of the stand ashtray changes instantly, violently and completely. It now makes sense that it is signalled as a false object when it first appears – it is 'bronze-effect', not real bronze, something that appears to be something that it is not (p. 6). It appears to be an innocuous domestic object; it is, in fact, a murder weapon. When the stand-ashtray appears thereafter, it is the most important thing Frances must clean up, the most incriminating clue in a long trail of incriminating clues. She '[plunges] it into the coals, trying to scorch it and cleanse it' (p. 353), but can never return it to its former condition: later, when a visitor to the house uses it, the reader's attention is drawn to its scorch marks and stains (p. 421). The stand-ashtray becomes quite literally – and indelibly – inscribed with the story of Leonard's murder, and yet the police never even notice it is there. In this way, perhaps it does become tenuously associated with the bonds between women, albeit not in the same sense as the ring, the pyjamas and the china caravan: it is never identified as the murder weapon because such an identification would mean that one of the three women in the house is a suspect. As we have seen in Chapter 1, it is precisely Frances' and Lilian's gender, and their relationship with each other, that paradoxically prevents their detection as the culprits.

Conclusion

The objects palimpsest is harder to pin down than the paper palimpsest. Although I discuss both as different conceptualisations of the same literary metaphor, the paper palimpsest in Chapter 2 is also a literal palimpsest, with obvious layers of accretion and superimposition.

The simultaneity of different time periods can be immediately apprehended both within and on the surface of each of Ashbee's volumes. Finding and engaging with history through an object is rather more difficult. The primary purpose of Waters' representation of the objects in these novels is to explore the extent to which they enable meaningful, tangible encounters with the past, but there is also a sense in which she is appealing to the reader's perception of historical artefacts as evocative and beautiful, things from which tactile pleasure can be derived. Thus Kay's handling of the paraphernalia of 1940s cigarette smoking provides a vivid, almost cinematic flashback to the wartime version of Kay, but it also provides a kind of vicarious pleasure for the reader living in an age when smokers do not withdraw their cigarettes from a silver case with 'a stylish, idle gesture' (p. 75). It is important to point out that this is not the same thing as the exploitative fetishising of the book that *Fingersmith* warns against, despite Lucy Daniel's complaint that 'occasionally the sheer volume of domestic paraphernalia' on display in *The Paying Guests* 'makes one feel that one is also looking at a museum cabinet'.⁹¹ The dual function of the objects in these novels, which almost seems designed to appeal respectively to her academic and general readerships, does make it harder still to evaluate how they work in a historiographic sense.

It is the female- or lesbian-centred objects whose meaning is most unstable. Duncan's bits of antique bric-a-brac are rooted to their point of origin in the past, entirely dislocated from the present in which he handles them (p. 26). Similarly, the plaster acorn loses its meaning as soon as Faraday has removed it – it is the act of theft itself, the prising away of part of the house with his schoolboy's pen-knife, that is important (p. 3). The stand-ashtray, which is part of the

⁹¹ Lucy Daniel, 'The Paying Guests by Sarah Waters, review: eerie, virtuoso writing', *The Telegraph*, 30th August 2014
<https://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/books/bookreviews/11061441/The-Paying-Guests-by-Sarah-Waters-review-eerie-virtuoso-writing.html> [Accessed 12th May 2017].

novel's manipulation of the conventions of detective fiction, is the most temporally and spatially fixed of all the objects under consideration in this chapter – the Barbers install it in their sitting room, and there it remains, even after Lilian uses it to kill Leonard. In this sense, Waters represents these objects in a way that reflects their material properties. This is how the female- or lesbian-centred objects are made particularly indelible and memorable. The meaning of the pyjamas Kay buys for Helen in *The Night Watch* is, like the silk from which they are made, slippery and elusive, just like Helen's love and fidelity; the meaning of Kay's ring in the same novel is more mutable than any other object in Waters' fiction; the china caravan is 'hollow, with a hole in the bottom', which is how Frances perceives her relationship with Lilian at this point in the narrative (p. 531). The key thing here is that Duncan's bric-a-brac and Faraday's acorn are historical objects within the fictive present of their respective novels, while the pyjamas, the ring and the china caravan are new, or relatively new, to those characters who own or receive them – they seem 'historical' only to the reader of these works of historical fiction. In other words, the novel draws a distinction between artefacts and objects, while still insisting that this boundary is porous.

The china caravan is particularly useful in reaching a conclusion to this chapter. Towards the end of the novel, Lilian goes to 'the *cold* fireplace' and '[gazes] at all the clutter on the mantelpiece, the elephants, the tambourine, the caravan, all of it dulled, the bright surfaces clouded as if by gusts of sour breath' (p. 537; italics mine). The symbolism is obvious: Spencer Ward, the young man charged with Leonard's murder, is about to go on trial, and Frances and Lilian face the possibility of seeing an innocent man jailed for the crime they committed – so their relationship has similarly soured. There are important implications here for how the novel suggests encounters with the past – specifically a lesbian past – can be shaped by and through historical objects. The reader, particularly the lesbian reader, wants to romanticise and idealise

Frances and Lilian's relationship, wants to root for their happy ending. We might compare this to the idea that meaningful, tangible encounters with the past are possible, in a relatively straightforward sense, through historical artefacts. The episode where it seems as though Frances and Lilian's relationship is about to crack under the pressure offers a subtle clue that we should be cautious about accepting this idea. Gildersleeve and Sulway's response to *The Paying Guests* offers a perspective on Lilian that is not found anywhere else:

Lilian offers Frances a belief in the romance she thought was lost. However, their love affair, like everything else thought to be 'good' in *The Paying Guests*, is suggested to be a sham. Lilian [...] is not an offering of peace, but of death. Lilian's apparent bisexuality, combined with the narrative's focalisation only through Frances, makes [Lilian] appear duplicitous. Her discovery that she is pregnant presents an obstacle which forces Frances to recognise her lover's deceit.⁹²

This is what the 'hollow' caravan represents (p. 531). It is the only object of those under consideration here that clearly straddles the boundary of 'artefact' (i.e. historical, from the past) and 'object' (new, in the present): Frances gives it to Lilian in the fictive present of the novel, but it is also coded as an artefact by virtue of its connection to a significant episode in lesbian history – the affair between Vita Sackville-West and Violet Trefusis. (Claire O'Callaghan has argued that the pearl buttons on the pyjamas connect them to a long history of lesbian love, but the straddling of the boundary is perhaps not quite so clear or specific, as they are not associated with a particular historical event or individual.)⁹³ Ultimately, the caravan, along with the other female- and lesbian-centred objects in Waters' twentieth-century-set novels, counters the idea

⁹² Jessica Gildersleeve and Nike Sulway, 'The Violent Pacifist: Ethics and Disorder in Sarah Waters' *The Paying Guests*', *English* (68), p. 73.

⁹³ O'Callaghan, 'The equivocal symbolism of pearls', p. 21.

that history can be accessed in a straightforward way through encounters with objects. This is not to say that the novels imply that a meaningful engagement with the past is not possible through such objects; rather, we understand that accounts of lesbian lives and experiences are no easier to retrieve through material encounters than they are through textual ones.

Chapter 4: Darkness and the hiddenness of queer history in *Tipping the Velvet*, *Affinity*, *The Night Watch* and *The Paying Guests*

Introduction: Darkness in Waters' fiction

My room is dark, but darkness is different for me now. I know all its depths and textures
– darkness like velvet, darkness like felt, darkness bristling as coir or prison wool.¹

This quotation from Waters' second novel *Affinity* (1999) exemplifies the transformative potential and sensuous allure of darkness in her fiction, with the gradation from 'velvet' to 'prison wool' echoing her acknowledgement that the novel is 'about the pleasures and dangers of darkness: the pleasures when you are in control of it, and the dangers coming from it when you are at its mercy.'² In Waters' fiction, first love scenes between women always take place at night, and in small, dark spaces. These spaces are materially tenuous, sometimes partly constituted by physical structures like doors and windows, but chemically altered by darkness itself, and by women's desire for each other. In *Tipping the Velvet* (1998), for example, the build-up to the first kiss between Nancy and Kitty happens in their carriage – but the kiss itself takes place outside, in the shadow of the carriage, where they are hidden from the driver's view.³ Darkness in these novels is thus sensuously described, invested with qualities that lend it physical substance and texture. In this chapter, the focus of my readings is the scullery in *The Paying Guests* (2014), a dark space which makes literal the metaphor of the closet.⁴ My

¹ Sarah Waters, *Affinity* (London: Virago, 2002), p. 304.

² Lucie Armitt, interview with Sarah Waters (CWWN Conference, University of Wales, Bangor, 22nd April 2006), *Feminist Review* 85 (2007), p. 122.

³ Sarah Waters, *Tipping the Velvet* (London: Virago, 2002), p. 102.

⁴ Sarah Waters, *The Paying Guests* (London: Virago, 2014).

discussion of the carriage in *Tipping the Velvet* leads to my consideration of how the character of Bill in the same novel might point to queer history's blind spot on 'race'. Finally, I consider Waters' representations of darkness in *Affinity* and *The Night Watch* (2006).⁵

Here and elsewhere in Waters' fiction, hiding and secrecy also constitute a kind of darkness. In *The Paying Guests*, the first sex scene between Frances and Lilian takes place in the small hours of the morning behind the locked door of the scullery, which is 'dark as blindness after the gaslit kitchen', and puts the lovers quite literally in the closet (p. 222). I argue that this pays homage to Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's conceptualisation of the closet – something I draw on at length in this chapter – in that the scullery affords a 'very equivocal privacy' and the encounter is charged with a high risk of discovery.⁶ The 1922 setting of the novel is significant here, with the binary between 'in' and 'out' of the closet being reasonably clearly defined: attention is drawn to the 'shot bolt' and the contrast between the brightly lit kitchen and the dark scullery (p. 222).⁷ 1922 is also the high watermark of literary modernism – Virginia Woolf's *Mrs Dalloway*, T S Eliot's *The Waste Land* and James Joyce's *Ulysses* were all published in this year – and there is the sense that, in her knowing, self-conscious queering of her modernist setting, Waters is mocking literary culture and the academy and their canonising and reifying of literary texts. For Gildersleeve and Sulway, Waters '[draws] on a Modernist tendency to mourn the lost innocence of the Victorian age', but it would perhaps be more accurate to say that she subtly satirises it.⁸ (Kate Webb points out that Leonard Barber's names echoes that of Leonard Bast in E M Forster's *Howards End* (1910), also 'unable to contain his desires', but

⁵ Sarah Waters, *The Night Watch* (London: Virago, 2011).

⁶ Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008), p. 71.

⁷ As I have discussed earlier, the novel is set prior to the period in which the modern lesbian entered English public consciousness (see Doan, *Fashioning Sapphism*).

⁸ Jessica Gildersleeve and Nike Sulway, 'The Violent Pacifist: Ethics and Disorder in Sarah Waters' *The Paying Guests*', *English* 68 (2019), p. 71.

‘more subversive’, with his desire for ‘material and sexual freedom’.)⁹ This queering of modernism is perhaps one of the less obvious ways in which Waters challenges the literary canon by inserting hidden or submerged histories into the narrative of mainstream history.

The dark spaces in Waters’ novels – the prison cell, the scullery, the carriage, the bomb-damaged building – are somewhere between public and private. Much of this chapter will focus on these spaces, so it is necessary to use or devise an appropriate term by which to refer to them. Susan Alice Fischer’s comparison between *Affinity* and Virginia Woolf’s *Night and Day* (1919) is useful here. Fischer argues that while ‘indoor and outdoor spaces are clearly marked’ in Waters’ novel, there are other spaces, less clearly defined, that allow characters to resist their marginalisation.¹⁰ Fischer uses the term ‘in between’ to refer to these spaces: the Thames is an ‘in-between’ space where Margaret Prior, the protagonist, ‘pull[s] herself together before meeting her mother’s gaze’; cabs are ‘a space between social convention and freedom of movement’; the world of Victorian spiritualism is ‘the space between Margaret’s home and the prison’.¹¹ I will hereafter follow Fischer in using ‘the space between’ or ‘in-between space’ to refer to the kind of dark spaces that, in terms of queer history and identity, trouble the boundaries of ‘in’ and ‘out’, hidden and visible, private and public, stable and unstable.

In *The Paying Guests*, the secrecy of the affair between Frances and Lilian means that their assignations are rushed and furtive, and take place in such liminal spaces. On one occasion, Lilian ‘hover[s] in the [upstairs] sitting-room doorway’, waiting for Frances; they stand ‘on the

⁹ Webb, Kate, ‘One small brave thing’, *Times Literary Supplement*, 24th October 2017
<<https://katwebb.wordpress.com/2014/11/03/sarah-waters-the-paying-guests-tls/>>
[Accessed 12th January 2018].

¹⁰ Susan Alice Fischer, “‘Taking Back the Night’? Feminism in Sarah Waters’ *Affinity* and Virginia Woolf’s *Night and Day*”, in *Sarah Waters: Contemporary Critical Perspectives*, ed. by Kaye Mitchell (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), p. 26.

¹¹ Fischer, ‘Taking Back the Night’, p. 26, p. 23, p. 27.

landing, close together but too nervous to embrace', but have to '[spring] apart' when they hear a door bang elsewhere in the house (pp. 233-234). The liminal space of the landing reflects Frances' identity, which is somewhere between the spinster who cannot escape her mother and the queer woman who is free to defy convention; similarly, for much of the novel, Lilian's identity is constructed around the tension between being Leonard's wife and Frances' lover. Waters' use of this kind of space, and its possible overlap with the territory of postcolonial theory (as I discuss below), has some potentially difficult implications: the past she represents is overwhelmingly a *white* past, in that we know her characters are white because their whiteness is, in Sara Ahmed and Ruth Frankenberg's terms, not marked.¹² If further proof of this were needed, the ethnicity of the very minor character of Bill in *Tipping the Velvet* is marked as his defining characteristic with his first introduction, when Nancy tells us that 'he was a black fellow' (p. 149). Waters has recently said that, were she to write the novel again, she 'wouldn't wheel in a black character [...] just to have him be part of the white protagonist's moral education.'¹³ I will show in this chapter that, like the mainstream patriarchal tradition it seeks to subvert, queer history has its own blind spots that can obscure other histories.

Critical contexts

Affinity is formally unconventional in relation to Waters' other novels, in that it is narrated in the form of two diaries. The first is in the voice of Margaret Prior, upper-middle-class daughter of a distinguished male scholar and historian, who makes philanthropic visits to Millbank, a women's prison on the banks of the Thames. There she meets and is powerfully drawn to Selina Dawes, a disgraced spiritualist who has been imprisoned for fraud and assault, whose journal

¹² Sara Ahmed, 'A Phenomenology of Whiteness', *Feminist Theory* 8 (2007), p. 149; Ruth Frankenberg, *White Women, Race Matters: The Social Construction of Whiteness* (London: Routledge, 1993), p. 1.

¹³ Sarah Waters, 'It was an electric time to be gay: twenty years of *Tipping the Velvet*', *The Guardian Review*, 20th January 2018, p. 37.

forms the second narrative strand of the novel. Selina convinces Margaret that the spirits can break her free of her prison cell and bring her to Cheyne Walk, where Margaret's home is, and they will run away together. At the end of the novel, after Margaret has waited through the night for Selina to come, it is revealed that the gifts and tokens which Margaret believes were brought to her from Selina by the spirits were in fact planted in Margaret's bedroom by her servant, Ruth Vigers, who has been working with a prison matron, Mrs Jelf, to smuggle the items out of Millbank and so convince Margaret of the authenticity of Selina's spiritual powers.

The narrative success of the novel's *dénouement* – that is, its successful concealment from the reader until the crucial moment – rests on the reader's adoption of Margaret's upper-middle-class perspective, so that we do not notice Ruth Vigers, who is rendered invisible by her occupation and working-class status.¹⁴ In Margaret's journal she is 'Vigers' and in Selina's she is 'Ruth'; only at the end of the novel does the reader put first name and surname together and make the deduction that Ruth Vigers is also Peter Quick, the male 'spirit-control' whom Selina convinced clients was a real spirit who acted as gatekeeper for her communion with the spirit world. Lucie Armitt notes that Waters 'works directly with the social aspects of visibility and invisibility inspiring Castle's book' so that Vigers is literally seen but culturally invisible; in placing the architect of the prison escape plot right under the protagonist's nose, Waters hides the lesbian in plain sight much as she is 'ghosted', to use Castle's term, in Western culture.¹⁵ Writing with Sarah Gamble, Armitt further contends that while Margaret spends much of her time in the literal darkness of the prison or her bedroom at night, she is actually rendered highly visible by the scrutinising gaze of her mother and the contrasting ability of Vigers to operate

¹⁴ Louisa Hadley, *Neo-Victorian Fiction and Historical Narrative: The Victorians and Us* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), p. 104.

¹⁵ Lucie Armitt, *Twentieth-Century Gothic* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2011), p. 126; Terry Castle, *The Apparitional Lesbian* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), p. 4.

the machinations of the plot undetected.¹⁶ In a novel preoccupied with the connection between darkness and seeing/blindness, there is, as Ann Heilmann observes, a kind of authorial deception and trickery at work in the way Waters exploits the class blindness of both Margaret and the reader: we are ‘in the dark’ as far as our ability to ‘see’ the complicity between Selina and Ruth Vigers is concerned.¹⁷ Ideas about how Waters comments on queer history through her characterisation of Ruth Vigers are developed in more recent critical responses: in her work on the tension between queer and feminist theories in Waters’ fiction, Claire O’Callaghan argues that Vigers ‘reflects a queer articulation of subjectivity. She ‘trebly haunts’ the novel, appearing as Ruth – Mrs Brink’s and Selina’s maidservant, as Vigers – Margaret’s maidservant, and as Peter Quick – Selina’s male spirit-guide’.¹⁸ In this sense, then, Vigers is more than just a ‘puppet master’ – she stands as a reminder of the complex identity work queer subjects must do if they are to evade detection and regulation.¹⁹

Elsewhere, a number of critics explore the palimpsest in relation to *Affinity*. Kathryn Simpson argues that the novel’s reworking of themes and ideas around female identity in Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s *Aurora Leigh* (Margaret and Selina adopt the names of its two female characters, the eponymous heroine and Marian Erle respectively, as a way of underlining the secrecy of their relationship) is palimpsestic: the story is ‘intertextually layered and overwritten, bearing traces of the past which illuminate and complicate our reading in the present.’²⁰ Similarly, Kym Brindle contends that Vigers ‘powerfully overwrites [Margaret’s]

¹⁶ Lucie Armitt and Sarah Gamble, ‘The haunted geometries of Sarah Waters’ *Affinity*’, *Textual Practice* 20 (2006), p. 152.

¹⁷ Ann Heilmann, ‘Doing it With Mirrors: Neo-Victorian Metatextual Magic in *Affinity*, *The Prestige* and *The Illusionist*’, *Neo-Victorian Studies* 2:2 (2009-10), p. 28.

¹⁸ Claire O’Callaghan, *Sarah Waters: Gender and Sexual Politics* (London: Bloomsbury, 2017), p. 63.

¹⁹ Diana Wallace, *Female Gothic Histories* (Cardiff University Press, 2013), p. 72.

²⁰ Kathryn Simpson, ‘Quick and Queer: Love-Life-Writing in *Orlando* and *Affinity*’ in Jones and O’Callaghan (2016), p. 51.

diary with her own preferred story.’²¹ This particular way in which the palimpsest metaphor operates is linked to the transformative potential and theatrical drama of night and darkness in the novel, which Waters herself acknowledges: ‘Selina [...] is very adept at invoking the dramatic element of darkness – telling Margaret she is going to come to her after dark, for example.’²² For Susan Alice Fischer, night has a ‘subversive potential’ that permits the expression of a queer subjectivity.²³ Mark Wormald sees this transformative quality as residing in the novel’s recurring use of fog, mist and wax imagery, through which darkness appears to take physical shape and form. This mutability of darkness represents, Wormald argues, a corresponding generic mutability in Waters’ writing, according to which the reader’s attempts to categorise Waters’ novels firmly as historiographic metafiction are resisted by their verisimilitude and refusal of self-conscious devices like contemporary frames or intrusive narrators.²⁴ Neither of these perspectives quite expresses the heaviness and density of the palimpsest in *Affinity*, which, as I shall argue later in this chapter, appears to be soaked in liquid rather than made of dry paper, so that queer history is submerged within it rather than merely concealed.

It is in this sense that I stretch and manipulate the palimpsest metaphor in this chapter. In Dillon’s conceptualisation, outlined in the introduction to this thesis, the term ‘palimpsestuousness’ describes the complex relationship between the layers of the palimpsest, in which ‘otherwise unrelated texts are involved and entangled’.²⁵ This model of the palimpsest, Dillon argues, affords a ‘radical queer [...] reading’ that ‘makes strange’ the

²¹ Kym Brindle, ‘Diary as Queer Malady: Deflecting the Gaze in Sarah Waters’ *Affinity*’, *Neo-Victorian Studies*, 2 (2009 – 2010), p. 73.

²² Armitt, interview with Sarah Waters, p. 122.

²³ Fischer, ‘Taking Back the Night’, p. 17.

²⁴ Mark Wormald, ‘Prior Knowledge: Sarah Waters and the Victorians’ in *British Fiction Today*, ed. by Philip Tew and Rod Mengham (London: Continuum, 2006), p. 194.

²⁵ Sarah Dillon, ‘Reinscribing De Quincey’s Palimpsest: The significance of the palimpsest in contemporary literary and cultural studies’, *Textual Practice* 19 (2005), p. 245.

concept of the palimpsest.²⁶ This strangeness is of interest to me as a researcher, with its suggestion of the ‘subversive potential of darkness in Waters’ novels’.²⁷ As we have also seen in the introduction, David Platten argues that processes of sedimentation and accretion make the palimpsest ‘sensual’, with its ‘chemical magic’ facilitating an ‘excavation of the past.’²⁸ Sarah Dillon further argues that the palimpsest must be continually revitalised so that it retains its validity as a methodological tool for twenty-first-century study.²⁹ With this in mind, I move away from the idea of written or printed texts in my refiguring of the metaphor, adapting and reworking it to suit my study of literal and metaphorical darkness in the four novels under discussion here. I argue that the liminality of the spaces in these novels is suggestive of a dark, three-dimensional structure in which queer lives and histories can be sunk or submerged, rather than merely lost. This is the liquid palimpsest. It rejects the linear model of history produced by a disproportionate focus on the first layer of a printed text, accommodating instead a queer approach to the past based on cycles of rupture and resistance. With its sense of something soaked and sedimented in history, this conceptualisation exploits what David Platten calls the ‘material density’ of the palimpsest, suggesting a structure that is weighed down with history rather than inscribed with it.³⁰ The liquid palimpsest works as a metaphor for queer history because it suggests the challenges faced by the queer historiographer, who must feel their way in the dark without knowing what they might find – or, indeed, if there is anything to be found. It also describes what is at stake in historical fiction, in that the novelist has to present that which is unknown: Waters herself has spoken of ‘the very patchiness of lesbian history’ and how this ‘incites the lesbian historical novelist to pinch, to appropriate, to make stuff up’.³¹

²⁶ Dillon, ‘Reinscribing De Quincey’s Palimpsest’, p. 257, p. 245.

²⁷ Fischer, ‘Taking Back the Night’, p. 17.

²⁸ David Platten, preface to *Rewriting Wrongs: French Crime Fiction and the Palimpsest*, ed. by Angela Kimyongur and Amy Wigelsworth (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2014), p. ix.

²⁹ Dillon, ‘Reinscribing De Quincey’s Palimpsest’, p. 245.

³⁰ Platten, preface to *Rewriting Wrongs*, p. ix.

³¹ Waters, ‘It was an electric time to be gay’, p. 38.

The liquid palimpsest evokes the lostness of queer history, but its inky, velvet sensuousness also evokes the subversive pleasure of being lost, the sensual allure of secrecy. In turn, the notion of things floating or drowning in dark water develops Dillon's model of palimpsestuousness: histories and stories are moving and shifting, rather than static; they are intimately entangled, rather than neatly and consecutively arranged.³² Angela Kimyongur and Amy Wigelsworth highlight Dillon's understanding of the palimpsest as characterised by 'a tantalisingly incongruous marriage of the notions of destruction and suppression to those of preservation and creation.'³³ Thus there is an inherent tension at the heart of the palimpsest, with the potential for what Dillon calls a 'positive reactivation' when the original inscription becomes visible again.³⁴ It is this idea of reactivation, which I understand to be quite different from recovery, that is expressed by the liquid palimpsest: its structure and composition imply that lost lives and histories can be chemically or even magically reactivated, rather than merely found.

The sense that night and darkness are transformative emerges yet more clearly from the narrative of *The Night Watch*. Responses to the novel make clear that this derives largely from its setting in wartime London, during which the physical landscape of the city was being *literally* transformed, often overnight, by bombing raids. This dramatic and often unsettling transformation is closely bound up with the idea of the new and exciting darkness of the blackout, as Waters observes: 'It's a city in which all sorts of clandestine things could go on in the shadows. People did seem to be having sex in the blackout all the time: gay sex, straight sex. It was a city newly born through darkness, really.'³⁵ Natasha Alden, like Susan Alice

³² Dillon, 'Reinscribing De Quincey's Palimpsest', p. 245.

³³ Kimyongür and Wigelsworth, *Rewriting Wrongs*, p. 1.

³⁴ Dillon, *The Palimpsest*, p. 112.

³⁵ Armitt, interview with Sarah Waters, p. 123.

Fischer, underlines the importance of darkness in affording characters the freedom to express their queer desire, asserting that Waters makes a direct link between darkness, invisibility and Helen and Julia's confessing of their feelings for each other.³⁶ Such ideas about hiding in *The Night Watch* comment on the hiddenness of queer history, and, taken together with the backwards time structure of the novel, point to the importance of memory in queer history and culture. This has been explored by a number of critics in relation to this novel in particular. Adele Jones and Kaye Mitchell identify Judith Halberstam's *In a Queer Time and Place* as a key influence, with Jones arguing that *The Night Watch*'s 'temporal oddness' places its queer characters outside the heteronormative time structures of birth, marriage, reproduction, and death.³⁷

Of greater relevance to this chapter and my reading of the novel is Claire O'Callaghan's more recent observation that the reverse chronology of *The Night Watch* is concerned with 'the significance of remembering' in view of 'the challenges faced by minority subjects in the past.'³⁸ O'Callaghan cites Halberstam's theory of queer temporality as Jones and Mitchell do, but she goes further in seeing this as being connected to how novel's engagement with affective discourses of 'nostalgia, regret, shame [and] despair' produces an overall focus on loneliness, loss and grief.³⁹ This reflects Waters' shift from a playful mode of historiographic metafiction (*Tipping the Velvet*) to the more melancholic and reflective tone of *The Night Watch*, which in turn reflects the tension in queer theory between the influences on Waters' earlier work (Judith Butler, Michel Foucault) and the idea that an acknowledgement of grief, loss and trauma is central to queer identity and experience (as advocated by Heather Love).⁴⁰ O'Callaghan

³⁶ Alden, 'Possibility, Pleasure and Peril', p. 75.

³⁷ Jones, 'Disrupting the Continuum', p. 33; Mitchell, 'What does it feel like to be an anachronism?', p. 86.

³⁸ O'Callaghan, *Gender and Sexual Politics*, p. 99.

³⁹ O'Callaghan, *Gender and Sexual Politics*, pp. 108-9.

⁴⁰ Love, *Feeling Backward*, p. 30.

identifies Love's theory of 'feeling backward', according to which contemporary queer culture has a responsibility to acknowledge and accept its history of darkness and violence rather than trying to 'fix' it, as a key influence on *The Night Watch*.⁴¹ She also contends that the interwar setting of *The Paying Guests*, with its attendant anxiety, sense of loss and unease about the future, examines continued and resurgent prejudices against queer women in the twenty-first century and articulates a scepticism about the widespread belief that there has been substantial progress towards LGBT equality in recent times.⁴²

The 'darkness' of white queer history⁴³

In this section, I consider how the dark spaces in Waters' novels comment on the lostness or hiddenness of queer history, but also on the implications of the increased visibility of queer culture in the late twentieth and early twenty-first century. This sense in which historical novels comment on both the period in which they are set and the period in which they are written is exemplified by Margaret's diary in *Affinity*, in which she records her feelings for Selina Dawes and their plans for escape, and which she believes is protected by darkness – both the literal darkness of the room in which she writes and the metaphorical darkness of secrecy. In reality, the diary is vulnerable to the penetrating gaze of Ruth Vigers, and thus renders Margaret highly visible. The problems inherent in the increasing visibility of queer lives and culture in the last twenty years are explored by Heather Love, who argues that the apparent progress that has been made towards equality and acceptance for queer people – gay marriage, the increased visibility of gays and lesbians in the media and popular culture – should not be met with

⁴¹ O'Callaghan, *Gender and Sexual Politics*, p. 109.

⁴² O'Callaghan, *Gender and Sexual Politics*, p. 157.

⁴³ I use inverted commas here to acknowledge that 'darkness' is a racialised term associated with postcolonial theory (see introduction to this chapter).

unqualified celebration. Some of the suffering of queer history should be allowed to stand as it is:

One may enter the mainstream on the condition that one breaks ties with all those who cannot make it – the non-white and the nonmonogamous, the poor and the gender deviant, the fat, the disabled, the unemployed, the infected and a host of unmentionable others. [...] Given the new opportunities available to *some* gays and lesbians, the temptation to forget – to forgo the outrages and humiliations of gay and lesbian history and to ignore the ongoing suffering of those not borne up by the rising tide of gay normalisation – is stronger than ever.⁴⁴

Here, Love argues that greater acceptance and visibility comes at a price – the mainstreaming of queer, rather than the queering of the mainstream that would signify true acceptance. If certain rights and privileges have been gained, then much has also been lost – the distinctiveness of queer culture, the otherness of queer spaces, the appeal of the margins and not the mainstream, and the awareness and acknowledgement of a history of oppression, marginalisation and abjection. There is, then, a challenging in Love's work of queer culture's focus on the present and future at the expense of the past. In similar theoretical territory, Lee Edelman argues that mainstream culture constructs queer as standing in opposition to – and thereby threatening – the very idea of a future. Embracing this, he contends, is the way that queer politics and identities can remain subversive and resist attempts to assimilate them into the mainstream: 'by figuring a refusal of the coercive belief in the paramount futurity [...] the queer dispossesses the social order of the ground on which it rests.'⁴⁵ Later in this chapter, I

⁴⁴ Heather Love, *Feeling Backward: Loss and the Politics of Queer History* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2009), p. 10.

⁴⁵ Lee Edelman, *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (London: Duke University Press, 2004), p. 6.

will argue that it is the denial of a history of oppression, which I understand here as a certain kind of darkness associated with the shrouding in secrecy of a queer past, that facilitates the most compelling reading of temporality and spatiality in *The Night Watch*. For critics such as Love, queer historical recovery is not a progress narrative; she aims to deliberately disrupt the Enlightenment conception of linear history. Edelman is less concerned with the recovery and recuperation of queer history, but certainly does challenge linear temporality.

Throughout this chapter, I use the term ‘darkness’ in different ways, and it is necessary at this point to explain the distinction I make between different versions of it. The word itself is, by virtue of its association with postcolonial theory and issues of race and racism, a loaded one, and there are issues with claiming it for white queer history. I use the term ‘in-between space’ not just for the reasons outlined above, but also to avoid the term ‘third space’, which is associated with Homi K Bhabha’s theorising of colonial encounters.⁴⁶ This is a particular issue in relation to my discussion of the whiteness of the past Waters’ fiction recuperates, and to my use of a feminist theoretical framework in certain parts of the thesis. In *Ain’t I a Woman: Black Women and Feminism*, bell hooks critiques the analogies white feminists have drawn between the oppression of women and black people, arguing that this analogy centres the white subject and obscures distinct histories of oppression.⁴⁷ It is difficult to devise a term other than ‘darkness’ to describe a literal lack of light, but I use it here only in this sense – to refer, for example, to the darkness of the scullery in *The Paying Guests* or Nancy and Kitty’s carriage in *Tipping the Velvet*. Where I describe a more metaphorical kind of darkness – the absence of queer lives and experiences from the historical record, and the violence and oppression queer

⁴⁶ Homi K Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (Abingdon: Routledge, 1994).

⁴⁷ bell hooks, *Ain’t I a Woman: Black Women and Feminism* (London: Pluto Press, 1987).

people have faced in the past and continue to face in the present – I use terms like ‘the lostness’ or ‘the hiddenness’ of queer history to avoid the loaded term ‘the darkness of queer history’.

Martha Vicinus shares with Heather Love an interest in the potential pitfalls of the visibility that comes with greater awareness and acceptance. Vicinus points out that the imperative of lesbian history is to ‘[make] visible the lesbian of the present and the past’, to retrieve her from the shadowy margins and put her under the light.⁴⁸ There is an obvious tension here, because the effect of this, Vicinus observes, is that ‘[t]his process of reclamation has focused almost entirely upon the mannish woman because she has been the one most obviously different from other women – and men.’⁴⁹ In my reading of darkness in *Affinity* I will argue that this has implications for the reader’s – and Margaret’s – response to Ruth Vigers: Vicinus shows that the mannish lesbian has been rendered particularly visible by lesbian history’s project of reclamation, yet it is precisely Ruth’s masculinity that allows her to ‘hide’ successfully when she cross-dresses as Selina’s spirit-control, Peter Quick. Valerie Traub similarly acknowledges that the project ‘to restore lesbianism to visibility’ is, by its very definition, something that is difficult to achieve in a methodological sense; ‘the problems attendant upon its representation [cannot] be so easily despatched.’⁵⁰ Is the aim of such a project to ‘construct a canon of lesbian authors’, or ‘to chart a chronology of changes in the cultural representation of female intimacy?’⁵¹ I argue in this chapter that Waters’ hiding of Ruth Vigers from both reader and protagonist serves as a metaphor for queer history in this sense. In *The Paying Guests*, Waters takes a particular metaphorical space from queer theory – the closet – and makes it into a literal one.

⁴⁸ Martha Vicinus, ‘Lesbian History: All Theory and No Facts or All Facts and No Theory?’ *Radical History Review*, 60 (1994), p. 63.

⁴⁹ Vicinus, ‘Lesbian History’, p. 63.

⁵⁰ Valerie Traub, *The Renaissance of Lesbianism in Early Modern England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), p. 11.

⁵¹ Traub, *The Renaissance of Lesbianism*, p. 11.

The Paying Guests: The scullery as a closet

In the early stages of *The Paying Guests*, the uncomfortable co-existence of the Wrays and the Barbers means that liminal spaces like hallways and landings become charged with the excitement and awkwardness of new sexual desire: when Frances and Lilian ‘have to pass on the stairs, they [seem] to be twice their natural size, all hands and hips and bosoms’ (p. 187). This preoccupation with small spaces reaches its apotheosis with the first sex scene between the two women, which takes place late at night, in the scullery. As they return home from a party, Frances feels a ‘helpless, electric sense that the space between them [is] alive and [wants] to ease itself closed’ – but they enter the kitchen to find Leonard Barber sitting at the kitchen table with ‘his head tilted back [and] a bunched tea towel clamped to his nose’, claiming that he has been attacked by a stranger (p. 212).

When Mrs Wray remarks that Frances and Lilian might have encountered Leonard’s attacker had they arrived home half an hour earlier, Frances feels no sense that they might have had a lucky escape, only a sad frustration at Leonard’s clumsy interruption:

No, it didn’t bear thinking about. And yet, when Frances did think about it, she found herself oddly unable to believe in the danger. She pictured the shadowy street, with herself and Lilian on it. She let her mind run further backward, to the train, the walk through Clapham. [...]

The moment seemed lost, the merest glimmer of a slender lure on a cast-out line that could never be reeled in.

Out in the kitchen the light was still blazing. The clock showed ten to one, but the thought of going upstairs, alone, to lie sleepless in her hot room – no, she couldn't face it. (p. 219)

It appears that Waters will not deliver the sex scene that the reader has been led to expect. There is, at one level, a plot-motivated reason for the delay: we later discover that Leonard was attacked by the husband of the woman with whom he was having his own extra-marital affair (p. 507). More significantly, the image of the palimpsest, introduced by Leonard's overwriting of what should have been the women's first sexual encounter with his own archetypally masculine story of blood and violence, is developed here through patterns of repetition and imitation, with Frances cinematically rewinding her memories of the evening in her mind.

The suggestion that Frances and Lilian might have faced danger from Leonard's attacker is presented as lacking the substance and authenticity of the moment of lesbian history that has, quite literally, been lost: Frances '[finds] herself oddly unable to believe in the danger' and instead superimposes images of herself and Lilian on the same setting. These images, however, are elusive, 'shadowy', and thus the ease with which Leonard overwrites and apparently erases the women's love story is contrasted with the difficulty of Frances' attempts to retrieve it from the very recent past to which it has been lost. We also see that the passage shifts from the ghostliness of Frances' memories of her closeness with Lilian to the exaggerated brightness of the 'blazing' light in the kitchen. This is important in setting up the scullery as a queer, semi-private and liminal space, distinct from and yet related to the heteronormative space of the adjoining kitchen, which is a public space in the context of the house.

Leonard goes to bed, and the two women are left alone in the kitchen. It is Lilian who initiates their first kiss, just as Frances is feeling certain that ‘the night [has] been overstretched’ and ‘[has] lost its tension’ (p. 220):

Then she realised that Lilian was not moving away; she was simply looking out into the passage to make sure no one else was near. Now, in fact, she was turning back, she was drawing a breath, she was stepping forward – pushing off from the doorpost as if gently but bravely launching herself into a stretch of chill water.

And with no more effort than that, no more fuss, she came across the room to Frances and touched her lips to hers. (p. 220)

The novel arrives at the first sex scene through a spatial diminuendo from passage, to kitchen, to scullery, with a corresponding shift in degrees of secrecy and privacy. The passage is a liminal space only in the sense that it is not a room in its own right: as a thoroughfare, it offers nowhere to hide. Lilian checks the passage, and then moves back into the kitchen, which, while not quite as public as the passage, is the most public room in the house, the centre of the inhabitants’ social interaction and a space dislocated from the notion of privacy by virtue of its association with female domestic labour. The kitchen is not, therefore, coded as a room in which the first sex scene between Frances and Lilian can take place, which is why Waters invests Lilian’s crossing of the space to kiss Frances with a certain degree of risk: the image of Lilian ‘pushing off from the doorpost as if gently but bravely launching herself into a stretch of chill water’ perfectly encapsulates the mixture of excitement and danger inherent in the coming-out act.

It is in this sense that I argue that the scene in the scullery pays homage to Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's conceptualisation of the closet, according to which the speech act of coming out is fraught with 'the double-edged potential for injury'.⁵² When Frances takes Lilian's hand and leads her from the kitchen into the scullery, Waters puts the lovers quite literally in the closet:

They went silently over the threshold on their bare feet. Frances quietly closed the door, eased across the squeaky bolt.

The scullery was dark as blindness after the gaslit kitchen, and the darkness was abashing; Frances hadn't expected that. She felt suddenly apprehensive. Lilian was right: her mother might come. Leonard was upstairs with a bleeding nose! How would they ever, if challenged, explain away the shot bolt? (p. 222)

Up until this point, I have framed my discussion of the palimpsest around a 'paper' model (Leonard's overwriting of Frances and Lilian's romantic evening; Frances' superimposition of images of herself and Lilian onto the scene of Leonard's assault). The movement from the kitchen to the scullery is the point at which I introduce the 'liquid' model. The spatial and cultural characteristics of the scullery are important in terms of how the novel queers this particular domestic space. A scullery is a semi-private 'in-between' space, an antechamber to the public space of the kitchen, with a specific and clearly prescribed function: washing and laundry. When Frances and Lilian enter the scullery, its meaning is subverted: a space even more closely associated than the kitchen with female domestic labour, and, by extension, with heteronormative femininity, is chosen as the setting for the first time the two women have sex. This queering of the space is established through Waters' knowing, self-conscious use of the phrase 'over the threshold', which is linked in the cultural imagination to the ritual practised

⁵² Sedgwick, *The Epistemology of the Closet*, p. 81.

by a newly-married heterosexual couple entering their home together for the first time. The way the two women enter the scullery – ‘silently’ and ‘on their bare feet’ – makes Frances and Lilian into their own ghosts, hinting at the hiddenness and invisibility of lesbian history, and underlining the porosity of the border between the kitchen and the scullery, between private and semi-private.

It is only *after* Frances and Lilian enter the scullery that it becomes a dark, sensuous, space, reimagined and reshaped around their queer desire. When Frances ‘[eases] across’ the bolt, the tenuous boundary between the kitchen and the scullery is temporarily reinforced and the scullery becomes a closet. The bolt ‘[squeaks]’, suggesting that the door is seldom, if ever, locked; the space created by Frances and Lilian’s desire for each other is transient and ephemeral, and will disappear as soon as the door is opened again. Thus the scullery is, like the palimpsest, chemically magic. It is in this sense of something being chemically reactivated, rather than retrieved from between layers, that I read the novel through the palimpsest metaphor here. Waters’ representation of this darkness, both here and later in the passage, becomes a metaphor for the lostness of queer history, and for the difficulty of recuperating accounts of queer lives and histories. In a reflection of the methodological challenges faced by the queer historian, the locking of the scullery door produces a sudden, disquieting darkness that is compared to ‘blindness’, to the condition of not being able to see, rather than to that of not being visible. Just as the queer historian has to ‘feel’ for what might or might not be there in the metaphorical darkness of queer history, so must Frances wait for the darkness to start ‘lessening’, until Lilian appears ‘beside her, a shimmer, a blur’ and Frances can shape her from the darkness itself: ‘She put out her hands, and they found her face, they found her lips’ (p. 222). This is presented as a chemically magic process in which the fluidly morphing and

shifting quality of the darkness not only activates Frances and Lilian's desire for each other, but also acts as a magic agent that generates the physical form and shape of Lilian's body.

The way the scene in the scullery pays homage to Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's conceptualisation of the closet can also be seen as a kind of chemical reimagining or reactivation of one of the founding texts of queer theory. Waters' novel makes strange and revitalises Sedgwick's work, just as De Quincey's inauguration of the palimpsest as a literary and cultural metaphor 'made strange and revitalised' palaeographic palimpsests.⁵³ In turning the closet from an abstract concept into a literal closet, complete with a locked door, the novel counters the notion that key ideas and theories from any academic discipline – even queer theory – can become monolithic and inflexible over time. One of the ways in which this is achieved is through the framing of the scullery episode around the point of tension between concealment and discovery. This engages with and subtly manipulates Sedgwick's focus on coming out as a highly risky act of disclosure, particularly in the sense that this 'risk of injury' arises from the way that 'the erotic identity of the person who receives the disclosure is apt also to be implicated in it.'⁵⁴ The scene in the scullery fully exploits the scope and potential of this idea, in that it is narratively connected to an earlier episode in which Frances confesses her earlier lesbian affair with Christina to Lilian.

Sedgwick's theorising of the closet is influenced by and develops Foucault's work on the significance of the confession to Western culture and history. In *The History of Sexuality Volume I: The Will to Knowledge* (1976), Foucault argues that 'the confession became one of the West's most highly valued techniques for producing truth', particularly in the sense that

⁵³ Dillon, 'Reinscribing De Quincey's Palimpsest', p. 245.

⁵⁴ Sedgwick, *The Epistemology of the Closet*, p. 81.

the act of confession is seen as the admission of a wrongdoing.⁵⁵ Frances tells Lilian about Christina during a moment of intimacy produced by their physical proximity when Lilian is cutting Frances' hair, disclosing this secret as though she is confessing a wrongdoing: "The truth is I did have a kind of love affair a few years ago [...] but it was with a girl." Frances then '[feels] Lilian's uncertainty in the slowing of her hands'. "I'd like to be able to say it was all terribly pure and innocent," Frances continues, "[but] it wasn't. [...] You know what I mean?" (p. 125). Although Lilian initially withdraws from Frances' friendship, the confession produces an intense intimacy between them that culminates, nearly a hundred pages later, in the emotional and physical expression of their desire in the scullery. Here, the 'shot bolt' – much more solid and decisive than the 'squeaky bolt' of a few lines earlier – offers protection from discovery, but also threatens a further forced confession if Frances and Lilian have to explain why they have locked the door.

Lilian and Frances implicate each other in the consequences of their mutual risk-taking. After returning from a holiday with Leonard, Lilian confesses to Frances that she is pregnant, and, by implication, that she has been sleeping with Leonard again (p. 304). Earlier in the chapter, I discussed the episode in which Leonard makes the simultaneous discovery of his wife's illegally induced miscarriage and her affair with Frances. The women's failure to keep their two significant secrets from Leonard is thus marked as a dual forced confession in Foucault's terms, with the novel's pattern of confessions – Frances' confession to Lilian of her affair with Christina, Lilian's kissing of Frances in the build-up to the scullery episode, Lilian's admission of her pregnancy, the abortion, and Leonard's discovery of the women's relationship – invested, in Sedgwick's terms, with a steadily increasing degree of risk and injury. Although

⁵⁵ Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality Volume 1: The Will to Knowledge* (London: Penguin, 1998, translated from the French by Robert Hurley), p. 59.

the scene in the scullery is not the most obviously dramatic or risky of these confessions, the way in which it pays homage to Sedgwick's conceptualisation of the closet makes it the focus of these ideas in the novel. In this way, the scullery's spatial and cultural characteristics are again chemically altered, redefined by multiple acts of disclosure.

The women's entry into the scullery thus marks 'the potent crossing' of a 'politically charged line of representation.'⁵⁶ For Lilian, the 'threshold' is the boundary between her conflicting subjectivities as Leonard's heterosexual wife and Frances' lesbian lover. The queering of this particular 'line of representation' is developed through Waters' descriptions of the physical characteristics of the space in relation to the women's bodies:

And, even as they were whispering, Lilian was allowing herself to be guided back towards the sink; and then she was braced against the rim of it, had parted her legs and opened herself to the delicate slide of Frances' fingers. [...] One of her thighs came in between Frances' [...] Frances shifted, ungainly, to straddle it, to nudge at it, to rub and strain. (p. 223)

As I explained earlier, the scullery has a clearly defined purpose that is connected to heteronormative femininity and the particularly rigidly prescribed gender roles associated with female domestic labour. In becoming a space in which two women make love for the first time, its purpose and meaning change dramatically, albeit temporarily. This is reflected in the way the reader's attention is drawn to the practical and functional impediments the scullery presents to Frances and Lilian: it is awkward and uncomfortable, with Lilian's '[bracing]' of herself 'against the rim of the sink' and the 'ungainly' positioning of Frances' thigh producing an

⁵⁶ Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet*, p. 6.

image of something that is the opposite of a setting in which we would expect a first sex scene to take place – namely, a comfortable bed. Just as queer subjects are marginalized within a heteronormative society, Frances and Lilian have to adapt a heteronormative space to accommodate the queer activity in which they are engaged.

In a queer palimpsestuous structure, layers of meaning co-exist in a complex, contradictory relationship rather than a linear one, ‘intricately woven, inhabiting and interrupting each other’.⁵⁷ This model describes the dark space of the scullery, in which the awkwardness of the room itself is contrasted with the sensuous, sensual qualities of Lilian’s ‘silky skin’ and ‘hot, smooth, astounding flesh’ (p. 222-3). The question of Lilian’s sexual subjectivity is queered, but not resolved: she expresses her desire for Frances both emotionally and physically, but subsequently resumes her sexual relationship with Leonard. Similarly, the boundary between the kitchen and the scullery is both concrete (the locked door) and porous (its meaning changes), and the border between the two women’s bodies is compromised as Frances fumbles for Lilian in the darkness, kissing ‘[her lips] again, even as she [touches] them, kissing around and across her own fingers’ (p. 222).

In the context of a narrative preoccupation with closetedness and secrecy, these notions of shifting boundaries and fluctuating meanings highlight the risks women have had to take, both historically and currently, to transgress the border that demarcates private from public, ‘in’ from ‘out’. The scullery episode thus reminds the reader that there is no single way of coming out, and that doing so is a repeated, ongoing process, rather than a one-off event. Frances’ fatally misguided complacency as their lovemaking ends, with Lilian’s abortion and Leonard’s murder still to come, reflects how queer subjects must continue to take the risks associated with

⁵⁷ Dillon, ‘Reinscribing De Quincey’s Palimpsest’, p. 245.

coming out. She '[takes] in the cry [of Lilian's orgasm] like a breath', but is 'certain' that '[a]side from that they [make] no sound, [do] nothing to unsettle the silence of the house' (p. 223). She is wrong, of course: her encounter with Lilian unsettles everything, marking the beginning of their highly risky and disruptive affair and setting into motion the chain of events that will culminate in Leonard's death.

Following Foucault, Sedgwick argues that "'[c]losetedness' is itself a performance initiated by the speech act of silence."⁵⁸ In Sedgwick's terms, then, the 'silence' that Frances finds so reassuring is 'rendered as pointed and performative as speech': Frances and Lilian may be literally closeted in the scullery, but the speech acts of silence and coming out that define this in-between space remain ambiguous and contradictory.⁵⁹ Lilian's 'cry' does not disrupt the 'silence of the house', but Frances' closing declaration that she has fallen in love with Lilian is an act of disclosure from which there is no turning back (p. 223-4). The scullery episode ends with Lilian '[setting] down' her left hand on the edge of the bathtub to 'steady herself against Frances' embrace', so that the women hear 'the muted tap of [Lilian's] wedding band, a small, chill sound in the darkness' (p. 225). The sound of the ring can itself be understood as a speech act, in that it signals that the confessions Frances and Lilian have made to each other will not remain secret for very long. In *Tipping the Velvet*, the confession Kitty and Nancy make to each other is charged with a similarly qualified and contingent privacy.

⁵⁸ Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet*, p. 3.

⁵⁹ Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet*, p. 4.

‘Her gaze was dark and strange and thick, like the water below’: The in-between space of the carriage in *Tipping the Velvet*

Set in London in the late nineteenth century and divided into three sections, *Tipping the Velvet* is narrated by Nancy Astley, the ‘Victorian oyster girl’, who becomes infatuated with male impersonator Kitty Butler when she first sees her perform at the Canterbury Palace of Varieties. Kitty hires Nancy as her dresser, retaining her services when her career takes off in the grand theatres of London. In time, Nancy joins Kitty’s act, with her theatrical education on the music hall stage providing the backdrop for her blossoming love affair with Kitty.⁶⁰ When Nancy returns from a brief trip to see her family in Whitstable, she discovers that Kitty has also been having a sexual relationship with Walter Bliss, their manager, whom she intends to marry. This crisis precipitates the second section of the novel, in which Nancy adapts her performance skills to the streets of London, once again wearing her stage costumes to play the role of a rent boy. It is this guise that she is picked up one night by Diana Lethaby, a wealthy widow, who inducts Nancy into a *fin de siècle* Sapphic demi-monde of adventurous sex, tailor-made suits and lavish parties with other high-society lesbians. Their relationship is, however, an exploitative and transactional one, and Diana throws Nancy out onto the street when she catches her having sex with her maid. In the final section, Nancy does indeed find ‘love and redemption’ with Florence Banner, a socialist and philanthropist from Bethnal Green, at last settling down with her after rejecting a final intervention from Kitty.

In this episode, Nancy and Kitty are in their carriage, returning home to their theatrical lodgings in Brixton after a party at the theatre where they have been performing:

⁶⁰ Stefania, Ciocia, “‘Journeying against the current’: a carnivalesque theatrical apprenticeship in Sarah Waters’ *Tipping the Velvet*”, *Literary London: Interdisciplinary Studies in the Representation of London* 3 (2005) <<http://www.literarylondon.org/london-journal/march2005/Ciocia.html>> [Accessed 21st July 2014].

Beside us, the pavements glittered with frost, and each street-lamp glowed, in the fog, from the centre of its own yellow nimbus. For long stretches, ours was the only vehicle on the streets at all: the driver, Kitty and I might have been the only creatures in a city of stone and ice and slumber. (p. 100-101)

This passage is part of the build-up to Nancy and Kitty's first kiss, which happens in the shadow of the carriage – not the carriage itself – when they reach Lambeth Bridge. With Nancy and Kitty's spellbound solitude, the novel begins the process of queering a history of London literature and culture in which 'the Thames [is] endlessly celebrated as a mythic concourse, a vital economic artery of Empire and a backdrop for stirring adventures in both children's and adult fiction.'⁶¹ Here, the description of London as 'a city of stone and ice and slumber' mythologises the city, but the references to such fundamental materials as 'stone' and 'ice' seem to dislocate London from the particular historical moment in which it is set – the *fin de siècle* – and with which it is elsewhere so deeply concerned. This is the beginning of the suggestion, developed later in the passage, of the alchemical properties of darkness, with their potential to invest ordinary things with the possibility of magic: sleep becomes 'slumber', the pavements 'glitter', and the streetlamps 'glow' in the fog'. The idea of chemistry operates here on a number of levels: the idea of romantic chemistry between women, the chemically magic properties of night and darkness, and a more literal kind of chemistry that is about the changing physical properties under the combined effects of darkness and extreme cold.

⁶¹ Nicholas Freeman, *Conceiving the City: London, Literature and Art 1870 – 1914* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), p. 7.

Again, I read the novel through the ‘liquid’ palimpsest model here in terms of the chemical reactivation of history and the past, rather than in the sense of their retrieval from between layers. The dark carriage is a liminal space, one between the public space of the theatre the two women have just left and the private space of the bedroom where they will end up; it offers Nancy and Kitty a qualified darkness and an equivocal privacy, as the presence of the driver means that they are not entirely alone. The carriage is also the setting for a similarly ‘in between’ stage of their relationship, as they make the transition from friends to lovers, just as the kitchen in *The Paying Guests* offers Frances and Lilian a liminal setting between the public thoroughfare of the hallway and the privacy of the scullery. All this is expressed through the literal chemical transformation of the Thames as it freezes over:

Now, with our faces pressed to the carriage window, we saw it all transformed – saw the lights of the Embankment, a belt of amber beads dissolving into the night; and the great dark jagged bulk of the Houses of Parliament looming into view; and the Thames itself, its boats all moored and silent, its water grey and sluggish and thick, and rather strange.

[...]

Below us, in the water, there were great slivers of ice six feet across, drifting and turning gently in the winding currents, like basking seals. (p. 101)

The boundary that demarcates the liminal space of the carriage begins to dissolve here, just as the ‘belt of amber beads [dissolves] into the night’: the way Nancy and Kitty watch the transformation of the Thames ‘with [their] faces pressed to the carriage window’ suggests both

a desire to transgress the boundary that separates private from public and the need to escape the gaze of the driver. Nancy's and Kitty's gazes move from the in-between space of the carriage to the public spaces of 'the Embankment' and 'the Houses of Parliament', both of which are reified symbols of visibility and scrutiny: the former is associated with walking and strolling to see and be seen, the latter with governance and surveillance. To hide and become invisible, Nancy and Kitty must therefore create a dark space of their own, one that is more tenuous even than the interior of the carriage.

Kitty '[calls] to the driver, in a high, excited voice, to stop', before pulling Nancy 'to the iron parapet of the bridge' (p. 107). The first kiss between the women is initiated by Kitty, but she then '[takes] her lips away [...] to give a quick, anxious glance towards our hunched and nodding driver' (p. 103):

She drew me into the shadow of the carriage, where we were hidden from sight. Here we stepped together, and kissed again: I placed my arms about her shoulders, and felt her own hands shake upon my back. From lip to ankle, and through all the fussy layers of our coats and gowns, I felt her body stiff against my own – felt the pounding, very rapid, where we joined at the breast; and the pulse and the heat and the cleaving, where we pressed together at the hips. (p. 103)

The fragile and porous borders of this in-between space are created by the darkness itself, and by the women's bodies: the points of contact between 'arms', 'shoulders', 'hands', 'lip', 'ankle', 'breast' and 'hip' are so minutely itemised that they become a kind of structure or framework around which the 'shadow' is shaped. In this way, the material properties of the darkness mirror the freezing of the Thames earlier in the passage, which, we now understand,

happens in synchronicity with a similarly chemical change in the women's feelings for each other. There is also the sense that one of the 'great slivers of ice' that floats to the surface in this passage is Virginia Woolf's novel *Orlando* (1928), which fictionalises the real freezing of the Thames that took place in the winter of 1608. Waters' playful reimagining of Woolf's novel, itself a playful reimagining of conventional notions of history and biography, gender and sexuality, is an example of how queer historical fiction can recuperate a history in which so much is unknown. In this way, the notion of the chemical magic of the palimpsest I have discussed here is also about *Tipping the Velvet*'s reanimation – its 'making strange and revitalising' in Sarah Dillon's terms – of an inheritance of women's queer writing by which the novel is influenced and to which it contributes.⁶²

The whiteness of the past in Waters' fiction

Tipping the Velvet is notable among Waters' fiction for a reason that has hitherto not come under critical scrutiny at all: the fact that the past she recuperates or recovers is – with one exception that I will explore in detail here – a *white* past. My aim here is therefore to investigate the extent to which Waters' work might contest some categories of privilege but reproduce others. In doing so I draw on the work of Sara Ahmed and Ruth Frankenberg. Ahmed's work on the phenomenology of whiteness interrogates whiteness as 'a category of experience that disappears through experience' so that it is 'invisible and unmarked'.⁶³ Similarly, Frankenberg argues that "'whiteness' refers to a set of cultural practices that are usually unmarked and unnamed", through which whiteness becomes normative and invisible.⁶⁴ If Waters is doing something like this, does her work have a 'blind spot' that limits or compromises the

⁶² Dillon, 'Reinscribing De Quincey's Palimpsest', p. 245.

⁶³ Sara Ahmed, 'A Phenomenology of Whiteness', *Feminist Theory* 8 (2007), p. 149.

⁶⁴ Ruth Frankenberg, *White Women, Race Matters: The Social Construction of Whiteness* (London: Routledge, 1993), p. 1.

effectiveness and legitimacy of her project of recuperation? Does the presence of a single non-white character in her work mean that she *does* go some way towards acknowledging the ethnic and cultural variety of Victorian and mid-twentieth-century London, or is this character's role – very limited, but not altogether unimportant in relation to the plot – part of the problem?

Bill, the black stage hand, makes three brief appearances in Waters' *first* novel. This in itself is of great interest: why are there no other non-white characters after *Tipping the Velvet*? Why is he there at all? Does Bill's presence mitigate to some extent the potential blind spot in her work, or would it have been better not to include him? As we have seen, Waters has admitted that, were she to write the novel again with the benefit of hindsight, she would not 'wheel in' a black character for the purpose of making him 'part of the white protagonist's moral education'.⁶⁵ This is her only comment on record about Bill's place and purpose in *Tipping the Velvet*, and she does not expand or elaborate on what she means. The question of whether she would include him again, but make his role different, or take him out altogether, is left unanswered. Bill is not introduced until roughly a third of the way through the novel, after Nancy and Kitty's relationship has started and when their cross-dressing double act is an established success on the London theatre scene:

He was a black fellow, who had run away from a sailing family in Wapping to join a minstrel troupe; not having the voice for it, however, he had become a stage hand instead. His name, I believe, was Albert – but he paid as much heed to that as anybody in the business, and was known, universally, as 'Billy-Boy'. He loved the theatre more than any of us, and spent all his hours there, playing cards with the doormen and the carpenters, hanging about in the flies, twitching ropes, turning handles. (p. 149)

⁶⁵ Waters, 'It was an electric time to be gay', p. 37.

It is hard to avoid the sense that Bill is a ‘token’ black character; Waters’ comment about him more or less admits this. His blackness is his defining characteristic, the first thing Nancy tells us about him in her narration – and he is a former member of a minstrel troupe. There may be some nominal historical accuracy in this, but in the context of a novel in which all the other characters are white, the immediate association made between the category ‘black man’ and that most reviled cultural symbol of racial stereotyping is, at best, a clumsy one. Elsewhere, the passage is at pains to make clear that Bill is an integral part of the theatre world, and that he socialises and interacts with other backstage staff on equal terms. He is accepted, he has a nickname, he is the same as everybody else; the theatre is a world in which difference is itself is accepted, and in which Bill’s blackness is not an issue. The casual reference to the ‘sailing family in Wapping’ he ‘[ran] away from’ implies that there is nothing unremarkable about black sailing families in Wapping, and that there are presumably others. The prevailing impression, however, is one of noble intentions that have not quite been realised. In highlighting and then erasing Bill’s blackness, does the novel imply an equality between black and white people that did not – and does not – exist, and, in doing so, does it render ‘whiteness’ invisible as a category of privilege?

To answer this question, we need to consider Waters’ representation of the relationships between Bill, Nancy, and other minor characters in the novel:

He was good-looking, and Flora was very keen on him; he spent a deal of time, in consequence, at our dressing-room door, waiting to take her home after the show – and so we came to know him very well. I liked him because he came from the river, and had left his family for the theatre’s sake, as I had. (p. 149)

It is important to remember that this is Nancy's voice – there is no sense of Waters' authorial voice intruding. Nevertheless the feeling that Bill's ethnicity is being handled awkwardly persists here. It is necessary to for him to be 'good-looking', as though Nancy needs to explain or rationalise why other characters like him in spite of his blackness, and making him the romantic interest of Flora, a white character, implies a level of acceptance and lack of prejudice in the theatre world that stretches credibility. Nancy's comment that 'I liked him because he came from the river, and he had left his family for the theatre's sake, as I did' is ambiguous and contradictory. Is Nancy totally accepting of Bill, or do we feel that 'I liked him' should really be preceded by 'Even though he was black'? What we are left with is the sense that she feels the need to explain her friendship with him. There is a subtle suggestion that there are lines of racial division drawn around and through the world of the theatre, although they may be fainter here than they are elsewhere: it is only through his relationship with a white character that Nancy and Kitty come 'to know [Bill] very well', the implication being that they would not have come to know him were he not in a relationship with Flora. Again, the intention is to represent the world of the theatre as one in which differences of all kinds are accepted: Nancy is portrayed as a character who does not see Bill's blackness. The effect, however, is the feeling that this risks erasing her whiteness as a category of privilege: she thinks that she and Bill are the same, but they are not.

We can argue that there *is* an equality that exists between Nancy and Bill. They both inhabit identity categories that are abject rather than privileged: he is black, and she is queer. The issue of the interplay between these categories, and whether one renders the other invisible, comes into play later in the novel. When Nancy flees the theatre in distress after discovering Kitty's infidelity with Walter, their manager, Bill is the last person to see her, and the friendship

between them is underlined: he tells her that she doesn't "look right at all", and calls after her in a voice 'lifted high in anxiety and alarm' (p. 177). It is, however, his third appearance in the narrative that makes his role in the novel more significant than it first appears to be, and that complicates the issue of the extent to which Waters renders whiteness normative and invisible in Ahmed's and Frankenberg's terms. In the following passage, Nancy is at the opera with Diana Lethaby, the wealthy society widow who is keeping Nancy as her mistress; she is handing in their coats at the cloakroom, and discovers that the attendant is Bill.

At first, I only stared; I think, actually, that I was considering how I might best make my escape before he saw me. But then, when he tugged at the coats and I failed to release them, he raised his eyes – and I knew then that he didn't recognise me at all, only wondered why I hesitated; and the thought made me terribly sorry. I said, 'Bill,' and he looked harder. Then he said, 'Sir?' (p. 286)

The 'other' that our attention is drawn to here is the queerness of Nancy's convincing performance as a boy, not Bill's ethnicity. Earlier in the novel, Walter is concerned that Nancy looks too much 'like a *real* boy' to perform according to music hall convention as a girl dressed as a boy (p. 118). Here, she 'passes' so successfully that an old friend does not recognise her. Nancy has to tell Bill her name before he realises who she is:

He said, 'Lord, Nan, but you gave me a fright! I thought you must be some gentleman I owed money to.' He looked at my trousers, my jacket, my hair. 'What are you up to, wandering about like that, *here*?'

[...]

'You're not in the *show*, Nan – are you?'

[...]

‘You mustn’t say ‘Nan’ now, Bill. The fact is –’ The fact was, I hadn’t thought what I would tell him. I hesitated; but it was impossible to lie to him: ‘Bill, I’m living as a boy just now.’ (p. 286)

Again, we see here that the focus of the passage becomes Nancy’s physical appearance and performance as a boy: Bill is startled and unsure how to respond, assuming that the only explanation for her being dressed in trousers and jacket with short hair is that she is ‘in the show’. He only comes to an understanding a few moments later when Nancy tells him that she is “‘living as a boy, with a lady who takes care of me” (p. 286). This is entirely in keeping with the novel’s primary focus on gender and sexual identity, and with Nancy’s status as the protagonist – but the issue of the connection between Bill’s ethnicity and the menial service work he is doing is not explored through Nancy’s eyes. This role is fulfilled by Diana and Maria, at which point the episode is invested with the potential for danger, even violence:

Diana tilted her head again: ‘What *is* the boy doing?’

‘He is talking to the nigger,’ answered Maria, ‘at the cloaks!’

I felt my cheeks flame red, and looked quickly back at Bill. (p. 289)

Suddenly, and in a way that is strikingly out of step with the how the social and cultural context around Bill is represented elsewhere in the novel, our attention is drawn to his abject status in the most direct and unambiguous way possible. The whole tone of the passage changes, and it becomes apparent that this exchange between a black man and a queer woman puts both of them at risk. At this point, we understand that the theatre *as a whole* is not a safe space for sexual or ethnic minorities, and a clear distinction is made between backstage (safe, semi-

private, in-between) and front of house (public, unsafe, where minority identities are clearly marked as 'other'):

I knew then that if I lingered near him any longer some terrible sort of scene would ensue. I didn't look at him again but went back to Diana at once, and said it was nothing, I was sorry. But when she raised a hand to smooth back the hair I had unsettled, I flinched, feeling Bill's eyes upon me; and when she pulled my arm through hers, and Maria stepped around me to take my other arm, the flesh upon my back seemed to give a kind of shudder, as if there was a pistol pointed at it. (p. 289-90)

The danger to Bill comes from Diana and Maria, and from other operagoers whose hostility might be unleashed were a 'terrible sort of scene to ensue'; the danger to Nancy comes only from Diana and Maria. Bill's blackness is visible; Nancy's queerness is not, because to the operagoers she looks like a boy, *not* like a girl dressed as a boy. The passage makes clear, however, that while the danger presented to Bill by the potential for a 'scene' exists only in this moment, the danger to Nancy is ongoing: the gestures Maria and Diana make to take her away from the cloakroom area are subtly violent and oppressive, and underline their absolute control over her. In both Bill's and Nancy's cases, their status as abject arises from their otherness, but Waters makes clear that the implications are different depending on the extent to which that otherness is culturally legible. Sara Ahmed asks 'If whiteness gains currency by being unnoticed, then what does it mean to mention whiteness?'⁶⁶ This is what Waters does not do here. She marks Bill's blackness, Nancy's queerness and Diana's and Maria's social class status, but she does not mark Nancy's whiteness. Indeed, in the case of Diana and Maria, it is their class, not their whiteness, that makes them privileged. In all Waters' other novels, the

⁶⁶ Sara Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology* (London: Duke University Press, 2006), p. 149.

absence of ethnic minority characters means that this whiteness continues to be ‘invisible and unmarked’ in Ahmed’s terms, producing a ‘blind spot’ in Waters’ approach to the past.⁶⁷ The final appearance of Bill in *Tipping the Velvet* does blur the lines here to a limited extent, but the fact remains that she does not pursue or develop these ideas elsewhere in her fiction: characters are straight or queer or working-class, but they are never ‘white’ in terms of their whiteness being marked.

Bill is, in the end, slightly more than a ‘token black man’. The episode at the opera gives him a small but not insignificant role in the plot: he tells Nancy that Kitty is working at the (aptly named) Middlesex Music Hall, ‘about three streets away’ from the Opera House, which prompts Nancy to run away from Diana to go and see Kitty’s new act with Walter (p. 288). *Tipping the Velvet* may be the most popular of Waters’ novels, but – by her own admission – it is in some places marked by the immaturity of the young writer. The less than adept handling of Bill perhaps explains why Waters has not included ethnic minority characters in her subsequent novels, but the effect, in terms of her body of work as a whole, is that the past she recuperates and recovers is a white one. What Waters says with Maria’s casual use of the n-word is that victims of prejudice are perfectly capable of being prejudiced against those whose identities are inscribed with a different ‘other’; queer people are not accepting of all differences simply because they themselves are marked as different; queer history has its own blind spots and can occlude and obscure other lives and histories even as it recuperates its own. This assertion rather founders, however, on the fact that Waters makes it through Maria, a member of Diana’s privileged circle of wealthy Sapphists who is on the same elevated social level as Diana herself. It is made clear that the wealth and social standing of these women, and the protection afforded by the rigidly circumscribed subculture in which they exist, make them

⁶⁷ Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology*, p. 157.

entirely immune to and insulated from the censure and judgement of a heteronormative, patriarchal society. We *expect* one of them to use the n-word; it might perhaps have meant more coming from the mouth of a working-class character at the same level of the social hierarchy as Nancy and Bill. In the next section, I discuss how the literal darkness in *Affinity* exemplifies the hiding and secrecy associated with lesbian duplicity.

‘For the night has Millbank in it, with its thick, thick shadows’: Darkness in *Affinity*

All Waters’ novels share an interest in ‘the pleasures and dangers of darkness’, but *Affinity* is cloaked in a darkness that is deeper, thicker and more suffocating than that in her other works. This is not just a matter of the novel’s settings – the prison, Selina’s cell, Margaret’s bedroom where she writes her diary by candlelight, the séances, the London streets shrouded in a Dickensian fog, or even the fact that the female prisoners at Millbank refer to solitary confinement as ‘the darks’; more than this, *Affinity*’s engagement with queer history takes shape around a three-dimensional metaphorical darkness that has shifting form and dimensions, and in which queer lives and experiences are deeply submerged. In terms of the shape and form of the darkness that is associated with the liquid palimpsest, this novel explores a queer past from which recovery and recuperation is potentially impossible: when Margaret imagines the prison warder ‘fastening [her] own past shut, with a strap and a buckle’, the ‘past’ she refers to is both the absolute secrecy and hiddenness that surrounds both her earlier suicide attempt *and* her failed lesbian relationship with Helen, who has now married Margaret’s brother, Stephen (p. 29).⁶⁸ In *Tipping the Velvet*, the palimpsestic shape of the darkness expresses the possibility that queer lives and experiences that have been lost or submerged can be recovered and reanimated; this idea is represented through the way the changing chemical state of the Thames

⁶⁸ Fischer, ‘Taking Back the Night’, p. 21.

becomes a metaphor for the awakening of Nancy and Kitty's feelings for one another. In *Affinity*, the Thames is also an 'in-between space' that is associated with the transformative potential of darkness, but it is represented in much less playful and positive terms than in the earlier novel.⁶⁹ Here, the Thames is 'as black as molasses' (p. 30), or transformed by 'a cold, miserable rain, that turns the surface of the river rough and dark, like crocodile skin' (p. 56). The Thames of *Tipping the Velvet* is the magic, chemical agent that discloses Nancy and Kitty's queer desire; in *Affinity*, the river is a malevolent, destructive force that breaches the spatial boundaries of 'public' and 'in-between' by seeping into a trench that once circumvented the prison, so that the convicts 'would find it, every morning, full of black water' (p. 60). This association is established early in the novel, in Margaret's first diary entry, when she records that she 'can't believe that there was ever a time when [Millbank] did not sit upon that dreary spot beside the Thames, casting its shadow on the black earth there' (p. 7). We see here how the darkness of the Thames merges with the darkness of the prison so that the two spaces become continuous, undermining the status of the river as an in-between space in Fischer's terms, and foreshadowing Margaret's implied suicide (presumably by drowning herself) at the end of the novel, when she discovers that Selina and Ruth Vigers have tricked her:

How deep, how black, how thick the water seems tonight! How soft its surface seems to lie. How chill its depths must be.

Selina, you will be in sunlight soon. Your twisting is done – you have the last thread of my heart. I wonder: when the thread grows slack, will you feel it? (p. 351)

Affinity might seem to be a novel preoccupied with written texts, and therefore one in which the palimpsest metaphor is focused on paper rather than liquid. Its narrative is constructed

⁶⁹ Fischer, 'Taking Back the Night', p. 21.

through Margaret's and Selina's diaries, and Margaret's historiographic project – to write the story of Millbank prison – is centred on traditional historiographic methods of reading and research at the British Museum. These methods are learned from her father, so there is a sense in which her ultimate failure to establish an independent, authoritative female voice in her field derives from her inability to 'write outside' the mainstream, patriarchal historiographic tradition. The metaphor of the paper palimpsest clearly resides in Margaret's attempt to overwrite this tradition, and its inevitable re-emergence from beneath the fragile, porous layer of her own history. Lucie Armitt and Sarah Gamble observe that Margaret's diary is 'overwritten' by Ruth Vigers, who steals it as part of the plot to trick Margaret into believing that Selina will be brought to her at night by the spirits, and thus superimposes the story of Margaret's love for Selina with the true 'affinity' of the very real relationship between Selina and Ruth Vigers.⁷⁰ There are also images of the paper palimpsest that express ideas about the 'lostness' of queer history, and which share with *Fingersmith* (2002) an interest in showing how the dryness of paper stands for the dryness of a patriarchal historiographic tradition that occludes and obscures queer lives and experiences.⁷¹ Margaret's fear that she will never escape the family home and the relentless scrutiny of her mother's gaze is expressed in these clearly palimpsestic terms: 'I shall grow dry and pale and paper-thin, like a leaf, pressed tight inside the pages of a dreary black book and then forgotten' (p. 201). The paper palimpsest can express this idea that accounts of queer lives and experiences can, in a spectral or ghostly sense, fade or disappear, but the liquid palimpsest – as I shall continue to argue in this section of the chapter – affords a much more developed idea of the palimpsest as a metaphor for queer history.

⁷⁰ Armitt and Gamble, 'The haunted geometries of Sarah Waters' *Affinity*', p. 152.

⁷¹ Sarah Waters, *Fingersmith* (London: Virago, 2003).

Ideas about the fluid, shifting nature of histories and identities, and the ways in which they become hidden or obscured, are explored through recurring fog, mist and wax imagery. Mark Wormald argues that, in the context of Margaret's memories of 'childhood stories and ghosts', it is fog in particular that 'can accommodate perspectives and creatures beyond the prehistoric megalosaurus of the start of Dickens' *Bleak House*. Indeed, it can be the medium by which a remote image can be restored and renewed, by dint of its proximity to literary archetypes'.⁷² There is the implication here that something is lost in the fog; that it constitutes a three-dimensional space in which things become obscured, and from which they can be retrieved. In support of this argument, Wormald quotes the following passage from *Affinity*, in which the reading room of the British Museum has had to be closed because the fog outside is so thick:

I thought it rather marvellous, to emerge from the museum and find the day become so grey and thick, and so unreal. I never saw a street so robbed of depth and colour as Great Russell Street was then. I almost hesitated to step into it, for fear that I would grow as pale and insubstantial as the pavements and the roofs.

Of course, it is the nature of fog to appear denser from a distance. I did not grow vaguer, but stayed sharp as ever. There might have been a dome about me then, that moved when I did – a dome of gauze, I saw it very clearly, it was the kind that servants set on a plate of summer cakes to keep the wasps from them.

I wondered if every other person who walked along that street saw the dome of gauze that moved when they did, as clearly as I saw mine. (p. 126)

⁷² Wormald 'Prior Knowledge', p. 194. Wormald refers here to the famous opening chapter of Dickens' 1853 novel, which offers a lengthy description of the penetrating power of London fog and its capacity to obscure everything it touches.

Wormald ventures that '[t]hrough such precise observations, [Margaret] Prior's narrative enables readers to recognise that the environment of her own prescribed predicament is also a space of overlapping, indeed potentially endlessly proliferating, subjectivities'.⁷³ He does not explicitly link this to the metaphor of the palimpsest, but it is quite clearly implied nevertheless. As Margaret leaves the reading room, she also steps outside her fragile identity as a female historian; her going outside into the street is thereby framed as an 'emergence', a merging of interior and exterior space, in which her subjectivity becomes, like 'the pavements and the roofs', 'robbed of depth and colour'. Thus Wormald understands the palimpsest metaphor here as relating to Margaret's multiple and shifting subjectivities, and to the intertextual reference to *Bleak House*. This does not, however, allow for the way in which the darkness engendered by the fog itself develops, extends and altogether complicates the image of the palimpsest.

The passage as a whole is fraught with complexities and contradictions that go beyond the notion that Margaret's subjectivity is palimpsestic. The metaphor is quite clear here: the fog is queer history – shadowy, insubstantial, dark, spectral – and Margaret, representing the lives and histories of queer women, fears that if she steps into it, she will be lost. There are echoes of her earlier fear that she 'shall grow dry and pale and paper-thin, like a leaf' (p. 201) – but this time, the image produced is of something that has greater depth than the paper palimpsest. A number of scholars have argued that Waters invokes Terry Castle's conceptualisation of 'the apparitional lesbian' in the hiding-in-plain-sight of Ruth Vigers, but Margaret Prior here seems to exemplify both Castle's original argument that the lesbian is 'in the shadows, in the margins, hidden from history, out of sight [...] a pale denizen of the night' and her 'primary goal [...] to bring the lesbian back into focus, as it were'.⁷⁴ This is how we can rationalise the sudden

⁷³ Wormald, 'Prior Knowledge', p. 194.

⁷⁴ Castle, *The Apparitional Lesbian*, p. 2.

and otherwise inexplicable switch Margaret makes from being fearful that she will ‘grow as pale and insubstantial as the pavements and the roofs’ to her perception that she is ‘sharp as ever’, covered with ‘a dome of gauze’ that moves about with her. The idea of darkness, with its contradictory capacity to both obscure things and bring them into sharp focus, affords this approach to queer history: things are lost within it, but they can be recovered. In the case of *Affinity* in particular, however, the prospect of recovery is much less certain than it is in Waters’ other novels: later, Margaret is ‘afraid that the fog [will] creep into [her] room, in the darkness, and stifle [her]’ (p. 190). Even in the in-between space of the cab she ‘[seems] to take a skein of mist in with [her], that [settles] upon the surface of [her] skirts and [makes] them heavy’ (p. 189). For the queer female historian, spectrality and ghostliness are unavoidable conditions of subjectivity.

The way in which Ruth Vigers is ‘hidden in plain sight’, in Terry Castle’s terms, is the true ‘darkness’ in *Affinity*. I argue here that this is not just a matter of her remaining literally seen but culturally invisible as a working-class woman and Margaret’s maid: the novel also makes a link between the ‘hiding in plain sight’ of queer lives and experiences in mainstream history and the way darkness can assume different shapes and forms. As I have explained in the introduction, the difference between the paper palimpsest and the liquid palimpsest is that the latter (a definition in which I accommodate the fog, mist and wax of *Affinity*) expresses a kind of darkness whose shape is palimpsestic, by which I mean that it is a shifting, morphing structure in which queer histories can become lost and submerged. Ultimately, Wormald’s argument is that, taken together, the fog, mist and wax imagery offer a metafictional comment on the form of Waters’ writing, which ‘take[s] vivid and apparently authentic period form only to melt and assume a new and unexpected fluency.’⁷⁵ Again, I suggest that this does not

⁷⁵ Wormald, ‘Prior Knowledge’, p. 194.

sufficiently account for the ways in which this imagery is explicitly associated with darkness. In this passage, Margaret thinks about the reading room at the British National Association of Spiritualists, which houses wax moulds of spirit-controls' hands, and wonders what might happen there 'at night' (p. 188):

Now I saw all the moulds begin to creep, across the silent reading room; and as they crept they softened, and blended, the one into the other. They formed a stream of wax, I saw it ooze into the streets, it oozed to Millbank, to the quiet prison. [...] There was only Selina, in all the sleeping prison, to catch the subtle slither of the stream of wax upon the sanded passage of her ward. [...] I saw it grow, sharp as a stalagmite at first, then hardening.

Then it was Peter Quick, and then he embraced her. (p. 188)

Margaret's vision is a manifestation of her desire for Selina and of her fear that a mutual desire exists between Selina and Peter Quick. As in *Tipping the Velvet* and *The Paying Guests*, darkness collapses the boundaries between bodies and the spaces they inhabit. In the earlier novels, this is bound up with queer desire: Kitty shapes an in-between space out of the darkness and their bodies, and Lilian seems to shape Frances' body from the darkness itself. Here, the idea that bodies can be shaped from darkness is rendered in much less subtle terms, and the transformative potential of darkness is much more sinister. It *is* associated with queer desire, but the desire is that between Selina and Peter Quick (who is Ruth Vigers in male disguise), and not between Margaret and Selina. The image of the wax melting and assuming new form with what Wormald calls 'new and unexpected fluency' is perhaps less about the form of Waters' writing and more about the capacity of Ruth Vigers to convincingly 'pass' as male.⁷⁶

⁷⁶ Wormald, 'Prior Knowledge', p. 194.

The wax moulds ‘soften’ and ‘blend, the one into the other’, implying a kind of ‘gender morphing’ that destabilises the idea of rigid boundaries between ‘male’ and ‘female’, and expressing the fluidity and ease with which Ruth’s switches between her roles as Peter Quick and Margaret’s maid. Her masculine appearance – attention is drawn to her ‘muscular arms’ – lends authenticity to her performance as Peter Quick and so allows her to remain ‘hidden in plain sight’ as Selina’s true ‘affinity’ and the architect of the plot to help Selina escape her prison cell. Indeed, what Margaret does not know at this stage is that what she imagines – an embrace between Peter Quick/Ruth Vigers – is what has actually happened, and will happen again in the room above hers on the night she believes Selina will be brought to her through the darkness by the spirits.

Elsewhere, as Waters has herself observed, Selina is ‘very good at invoking the dramatic potential of darkness’.⁷⁷ This is where the appeal of the dark in *Affinity* resides: despite its associations with the silencing of Margaret’s authorial voice, the sensuousness with which darkness is described in the novel invests it with a seductive power. Selina tells Margaret that the spirits ‘see everything’ (p. 111):

‘Even the pages of your secret book. Even should you write it’ – here she paused, to pass a finger, very lightly, across her lips – in the darkness of your own room, with your door made fast, and your lamp turned very low’. (p. 111.)

Selina’s deliberate theatricality here produces an overlap between the dark space of the prison cell and more obviously theatrical and performative space of the séance. There is the suggestion that the pause for effect and the gesture of ‘[passing] a finger, very lightly, across her lips’ are

⁷⁷ Armitt, interview with Sarah Waters, p. 122.

theatrical tricks, artfully contrived to influence an audience, that she learnt when she was a spiritualist. Margaret has earlier observed that Selina has a way of ‘shifting mood, of changing tone [...] very subtly’ (p. 86) that also clearly links back to the séances that Selina held prior to her imprisonment for fraud and assault. The image of Margaret as a writer that Selina constructs is both seductive and dangerous: the idea of writing alone at night by lamplight works to strengthen both Margaret’s identity as a writer and her belief that the ‘spirits’ are real, but later we discover that the ‘pages of [her] secret book’ have indeed been read – and overwritten – by Ruth Vigers.

‘Suppose we want to be invisible?’: Darkness in *The Night Watch*

In her descriptions of darkness in *The Night Watch*, Waters creates a space in which she explores and critiques the literary history by which *The Night Watch* is directly influenced. Natasha Alden identifies Elizabeth Bowen’s *The Heat of the Day* (1948) and Henry Green’s *Caught* (1943) as novels from which Waters borrows directly.⁷⁸ In terms of my argument about the palimpsestic shape of darkness in this chapter, the influence of two other texts – Rose Macaulay’s novel *The World My Wilderness* (1950) and Radclyffe Hall’s short story ‘Miss Ogilvy Finds Herself’ – are of greater interest.⁷⁹ Earlier in the baffle-wall scene, Helen and Julia’s decision to remain in the open air is prompted by the sight of Londoners queuing to enter the unofficial public shelter of an Underground station; just as in the episode on Lambeth Bridge in *Tipping the Velvet*, darkness and the city come together to suggest something that is beyond time and history. Julia watches ‘old ladies and men, and children’ with their ‘bags and blankets and pillows’ and tells Helen that it’s ‘horrible. People being made to live like moles.

⁷⁸ Alden, ‘Possibility, Pleasure and Peril’, pp. 74-5.

⁷⁹ Sarah Waters acknowledges Rose Macaulay’s novel as an influence on *The Night Watch* in ‘Romance among the ruins’. The connection between the two texts is also mentioned by Leo Mellor in *Reading the Ruins: Modernism, Bombsites and British Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), p. 203.

It's like the Dark Ages. It's worse than that. It's prehistoric.' (p. 358). From the perspective of both women, '[t]here [is] something elemental [...] to the heavily laden figures, as they [make] their uncertain way into the dimly lighted mouth of the Underground'; they seem 'like mendicants or pedlars; refugees from some other, medieval war, or else from some war of the future, as imagined by H G Wells' (p. 358).

At one level, these references to 'prehistory' and science fiction seem slightly out of place, or at the very least unexpected, in a Sarah Waters novel. At another level, they lead into the extension and development of the connection between darkness and queer history that happens shortly afterwards in the passage:

They walked to the middle of the bridge, then turned off their torches and looked out, westwards. The river ran gleamlessly beneath a starless sky, so black it might have been of treacle or tar – or might not have been a river at all, but a channel, a gash in the earth, impossible to fathom ... (p. 358)

Here, again, is the Thames – but divested of the transformative magic it has in *Tipping the Velvet*. The river is made to appear like this because of the blackout, but ironically the blackout serves to dislocate it entirely from its setting in a major twentieth-century city. In the description of the Thames as 'black [...] treacle or tar', 'a channel, a gash in the earth', it is as though the buildings and bridges by which its space is circumscribed disappear altogether; we are in the 'Dark Ages', or 'prehistory', or 'some medieval war', as are the hurrying 'old ladies and men, and children' of the Underground station. This spatial and temporal dislocation, distinct from Waters' lengthy descriptions of bomb-damaged buildings, is one of the ways in

which this is achieved. The novel is saturated with period detail, so how can we explain our sense that, in these passages, the novel reaches back to a past far beyond its 1940s setting?

The answer seems to lie in the way that Waters queers – and thus re-writes or overwrites – the texts by which *The Night Watch* is influenced. One of the ways she does this is through making an explicitly lesbian short story – Radclyffe Hall’s ‘Miss Ogilvy Finds Herself’ – the text through which the novel’s (re)reading of Rose Macaulay’s *The World My Wilderness* is mediated. This is most apparent in the following passage, which describes the early moments in Helen and Julia’s walk, before the kiss:

So they left the cathedral behind and started on the line of stone and broken tarmac that had been Cannon Street, but was now more like the idea or the ghost of a road, on a landscape that might have been flat open country. Within a minute or two the sky seemed to have expanded over their heads, giving the illusion of light; as before, however, they could not see so much as sense the devastation that lay about them: they tried to peer into the utter darkness of the ground, but their gazes slid about. (p. 361)

If queer history itself is invisible to, or can hide from, conventional methods of historiography, then the queer historiographer is afflicted with a kind of methodological blindness. Thus Helen and Kay literally cannot see what is in front of them, and their ‘gazes [slide] about’. In the darkness, what ‘had been Cannon Street’ is a faded palimpsestic imprint of itself, ‘the idea or ghost of a road’, the trace of something that was once there. The dislocation between the temporal and the spatial is developed through the image of this ghostly, spectral road leading the women through ‘a landscape that might have been flat open country’: the original road has passed into history only very recently, but the landscape around it has been taken back to a

time before the development of the modern city. This idea that different time periods can be palimpsestically compressed into the space of the city seems to be directly influenced by *The World My Wilderness*, set in 1945, in which childhood friends Raoul and Barbary find their playground in the bombed-out ruins of London streets and buildings:

She led the way into Fore Street, where what was left of Somerset Chambers gaped on the street. [...] The bells stopped. The children stood still, gazing down on a wilderness of little streets, caves and cellars, the foundation of a wrecked merchant city, grown over by green and golden fennel and ragwort. (p. 35)

Here, the past has ‘overwritten’ the space of the present, revealing a London from a time period that is not specific, but may be medieval. At the same time, the damage caused by twentieth-century bombs has exposed the layers of earlier periods in history, as though the newest layer of ‘writing’ has given way to the spectral, ghostly imprint of the ‘wrecked merchant city’ beneath.

In making a connection between *The World My Wilderness* and ‘Miss Ogilvy Finds Herself’, Waters queers Macaulay’s novel. Natasha Alden identifies Radclyffe Hall’s short story as another direct influence on *The Night Watch*, citing the obvious similarities between Miss Ogilvy and Kay: both are wartime ambulance drivers (‘Miss Ogilvy Finds Herself’ is set during the First World War); both find themselves ‘returned to suspicion and isolation’ once the war is over.⁸⁰ The short story is a deeply strange one, ending in ‘a quasi-mystical slip into a Stone Age past life regression, or dream, in which Miss Ogilvy is the strong man she wishes she was’, dressed in ‘a single garment of pelts’, with ‘extremely hairy’ legs and ‘a clumsily made stone

⁸⁰ Alden, ‘Possibility, Pleasure and Peril’, p. 77.

weapon' hanging from her waist (p. 250).⁸¹ The moments during Helen and Julia's long walk in the dark in which London appears to slip beyond or outside history echo both *The World My Wilderness* and 'Miss Ogilvy Finds Herself', but they do so in a way that acknowledges the difficulty of recovering queer lives and experiences from the darkness to which they have been lost. Waters' intertextual references '[place] *The Night Watch* in a continuum of lesbian experience', but the novel's refusal of linear temporal structures fractures this continuum.⁸²

The novel references contemporary queer theory as well as queer literary texts contemporaneous with its 1940s setting:

Two or three times Helen put her hand to her eyes as if to wipe veils or cobwebs from them. They might have been walking through murky water, so absolutely strange and dense was the quality of the night here, and so freighted with violence and loss. (p. 361)

Here, we are very far indeed from the playful approach to queer history of *Tipping the Velvet*. A number of responses to *The Night Watch* are concerned with how the novel departs from its predecessors in its exploration of queer subjectivity as abject. Helen's sensation that her vision is impaired not merely by the darkness, but by 'veils and cobwebs', echoes a history of queer lives and experiences that is so lost as to be in a state of decay and decomposition. The 'murky water' through which the women feel they must be walking underlines the sheer difficulty and uncertainty involved in recovering and recuperating queer histories; indeed, the whole of the final sentence, in which 'the quality of the night' is 'so absolutely strange and dense' and 'so freighted with violence and loss' could be a summary of Heather Love's thesis that queer

⁸¹ Alden, 'Possibility, Pleasure and Peril', p. 77.

⁸² Alden, 'Possibility, Pleasure and Peril', p. 77.

culture's 'dreams for the future are founded on a history of suffering, stigma and violence'.⁸³ The history of queer culture is, as Love reminds us, a history of darkness, and this passage signals the novel's willingness to follow her lead in acknowledging the 'violence and loss' of the queer past, and the acceptance of this as a condition of queer agency in the present.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have manipulated and stretched the palimpsest metaphor to its fullest extent while maintaining its integrity and a connection to its origins in classical antiquity. In this conceptualisation, the palimpsest is entirely metaphorical, unlike the textual (paper) and material (objects) palimpsest, in which it is possible to visualise – and, in the case of the paper palimpsest, quite literally *see* – the layering, the sedimentation, the accretion and accumulation of queer lives and histories. This is not possible with the three-dimensional liquid palimpsest: the reader or scholar has to imagine a pool of dark water, of infinite breath, width and depth, in which things are submerged and drowned. Accounts of lives and experiences lost within this structure are *so* lost that we cannot even see what they are; we can, to extend the metaphor still further, dive down and try to retrieve them, or fish them out with a hook or a net, but we cannot see what we are looking for.

Because of its darkness, its unknowability, its limitless dimensions and uncertain temporal properties, the liquid palimpsest is the most sensual and alluring of all the different conceptualisations, and therefore comes closest to exemplifying David Platten's comments on the 'sensuousness' and 'chemical magic' of the classical palimpsest.⁸⁴ More than the textual or

⁸³ Love, *Feeling Backward*, p. 1.

⁸⁴ Platten, preface to *Rewriting Wrongs*, p. ix.

material palimpsest, the liquid palimpsest evokes not just the lostness of lesbian history, but also the undeniable appeal of being lost, of not being visible and exposed, of being outside the parameters of the mainstream. The question of whether the liquid palimpsest laments this lostness or takes pleasure in it is highly ambiguous. These novels are works of historical fiction, so they comment on the period in which they are produced as well as the period in which they are set. The darkness in which the first physical expressions of love between Nancy and Kitty, Helen and Julia, and Frances and Lilian take place is charged with the sense of the out, accepted late 1990s/early 2000s lesbian longing for the secrecy and subterfuge of the past. As I explained in the introduction, Waters has said that the absence of a recorded and documented lesbian history means that the writer of lesbian fiction has to imagine and invent what isn't there.⁸⁵ This historiographic imperative is usually discussed in responses to her work in fairly negative, or at best neutral, terms: it is seen as something that writers of lesbian fiction have to do, because they have no alternative, and so much is unknown. Implicit within this idea is the suggestion that writers of male-centred heterosexual fiction (if indeed there is such a thing) do not have to do this, and that writing is therefore more straightforward for them, at least in terms of historical research and the representation of real historical figures and events. The sensuous allure of the dark liquid palimpsest allows us to ask if the requirement to invent, imagine and appropriate might actually be a fundamental part of the appeal of lesbian fiction for both writers and readers. In 'Making up lost time', Doan and Waters acknowledge 'the lure of history in lesbian writing, but also its limits.'⁸⁶ It is intriguing to consider how we might feel if we swapped the words 'lure' and 'limits' around, and talked instead about the 'limits' of history in lesbian writing, but also its 'lure'.⁸⁷ This is in no sense to deny the considerable damage that

⁸⁵ Waters, 'It was an electric time to be gay', p. 38.

⁸⁶ Laura Doan and Sarah Waters, 'Making up lost time: contemporary lesbian writing and the invention of history', in *Territories of Desire in Queer Culture: Refiguring Contemporary Boundaries*, ed. by David Alderson and Linda Anderson (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000), p. 13.

⁸⁷ Doan and Waters, 'Making up lost time', p. 13.

has been wrought – and continues to be wrought – by the absence of lesbian lives and experiences from the mainstream historical record, but there is scope to discuss the allure of lostness here because my conceptualisation of the damaged palimpsest in Chapter 1 allows for the discussion of a history of trauma and suffering. In turn, this underlines how using different conceptualisations of the palimpsest, as I do throughout this thesis, affords a multiplicity of perspectives on and approaches to queer history, including one that has been completely overlooked in the scholarship on Waters – that she is writing white queer and lesbian history. The metaphorical ‘darkness’ engulfing those searching for this particular history tends to further obscure marginalised queer people of colour, whose historical existence remains sidelined in English queer history. A full discussion of this is not within the scope of this thesis, but my conceptualisation of the liquid palimpsest does raise questions about queer history’s persistent blind spot on issues of race.

Conclusion

Adele Jones observed in 2016 that Waters ‘has not been written about much outside the parameters of lesbian (and occasionally lesbian-feminist) theories or queer theory.’¹ The methodology for this thesis – the palimpsest – is technically outside these parameters, although Sarah Dillon has used the palimpsest to conceptualise the complexities of writing queer lives and histories.² In this project, I develop the palimpsest metaphor as a way of reading Waters’ fiction: to identify a gap in the scholarship in terms of finding new ways to read her novels, to contribute to the lesbian/lesbian-feminist and queer fields of scholarship on her work, and to reconceptualise her approach as a historiographer. In Chapter 2, the paper or textual palimpsest is the point at which my conceptualisation of the metaphor is closest to its point of origin in classical antiquity; in Chapter 1, my model of the damaged palimpsest attends to specific histories of trauma and suffering; in Chapter 3, the objects palimpsest draws attention to the overlap between the textuality and materiality of history; in Chapter 4, I stretch the palimpsest to its fullest extent, developing a three-dimensional model that conceptualises the hiddenness of queer lives and experiences in the past.

The most significant way in which my thesis contributes to the scholarship on Waters is my original archival research on Henry Spencer Ashbee’s bibliography. In following very precisely in Waters’ footsteps with my work on the Ashbee archive – visiting the same institution, sitting in the same area of the same British Library reading room, reading the same copies of the same texts, focusing my study on the same words – I was engaging in a method

¹ Adele Jones, ‘The Feminist Politics of Textuality: Reading the Feminism of Julia Kristeva in *Fingersmith*’ in *Sarah Waters and Contemporary Feminisms*, ed. by Adele Jones and Claire O’Callaghan, p. 115.

² Sarah Dillon, ‘Reinscribing De Quincey’s Palimpsest: The significance of the palimpsest in contemporary literary and cultural studies’, *Textual Practice* 19 (2005), p. 257.

of research that was itself palimpsestuous, in that I was imitating her research but then superimposing it with my own judgements and criticisms, and reframing it for my own academic purposes. Waters scholarship to date pays close attention to the intertextuality of her fiction, but in a way that focuses on her references to literary works, canonical or otherwise. There is, across this body of work as a whole, a clear acknowledgement of the multiple ways in which Waters uses her intertexts: to achieve verisimilitude in writing something that is ‘paradoxically more real than the thing it imitates’;³ to rewrite for a lesbian audience a well-known gay men’s novel, Chris Hunt’s *Street Lavender*;⁴ to offer a series of knowing intertextual winks to the knowledgeable literary reader, such as the clocks stopped at twenty to nine in *The Little Stranger*, a direct reference to Dickens’ *Great Expectations*.⁵ I do not mean to imply that there is anything wrong with these approaches – far from it – but it is surprising that the *Index Librorum Prohibitorum* has not been thoroughly examined in relation to Waters’ work until now. She is, quite understandably, seen primarily as a writer of fiction whose work is influenced by her *literary* background and knowledge. This means that her academic training as a *historian* has been overlooked (although her research into Ashbee’s pornographic archive is also literary research): for all the thousands of words of scholarship devoted to the nature of her work as historical fiction, and, in particular, to how she fills in the gaps of lesbian and queer history, there has been surprisingly little attention paid to the historical research she conducts in preparation for writing her novels, or to her methods as a researcher.

³ Marie-Luise Kohlke, ‘Into History through the Back Door: The ‘Past Historic’ in *Nights at the Circus* and *Affinity*’, *Women: A Cultural Review* 15 (2004), p. 156.

⁴ Louisa Yates, “‘But it’s only a novel, Dorian’: Neo-Victorian Fiction and the Process of Re-Vision’, *Neo-Victorian Studies* 2 (2009 – 2010), p. 187.

⁵ Ann Heilmann, ‘Specters of the Victorian in the Neo-Forties Novel: Sarah Waters’ *The Little Stranger* and its Intertexts’, *Contemporary Women’s Writing* 6 (2012), p. 44.

Adaptations of Waters' novels on stage and screen

Recent adaptations of Waters' work further support my point that commercial fiction writing is caught up in palimpsestic processes of production, distribution and consumption. The popularity of Waters' novels is reflected in the number and variety of these adaptations: her first five novels have all been adapted for television or film, and *Tipping the Velvet* (1998), *Fingersmith* (2002) and *The Night Watch* (2006) have also been adapted for the stage.⁶ *Fingersmith* has been adapted for the screen twice, both as a BBC television serial and as a film, the latter directed by the Korean director Park Chan-Wook with a new title, *The Handmaiden*. There has even been an adaptation of an adaptation, so to speak: Dawn French and Jennifer Saunders performed a parody of the BBC TV adaptation of *Tipping the Velvet* as part of their BBC sketch show in 2002. Heather Emmens has written about this extensively, so I will not discuss it in detail here, other than to say that the French and Saunders sketch parodied both the TV serial *and* the salacious tabloid coverage of the TV serial, adding further to the degrees of separation between the novel itself and its reception and interpretation in popular culture.⁷

An examination of the afterlives of Waters' novels on stage and screen further calls into question the positive readings of *Fingersmith*'s ending. Just as I have argued that such readings ignore the lack of control Maud has over the consumption of her texts, so Waters has had to cede control to screenwriters and directors in the adaptations of her work. She has been open

⁶ Sarah Waters, *Tipping the Velvet* (London: Virago, 2002); *Fingersmith* (London: Virago, 2003); *The Night Watch* (London: Virago, 2011).

⁷ Heather Emmens, 'Taming the Velvet: Lesbian Identity in Cultural Adaptations of *Tipping the Velvet*' in *Adaptations in Contemporary Culture*, ed. by Rachel Carroll (London: Continuum, 2009)

in her criticism of the heterosexualisation and feminisation of her characters in television adaptations, saying of Anna Maxwell Martin's performance as Kay in the BBC TV adaptation of *The Night Watch* that the actress was 'mesmerising as always', but 'not my butch Kay'.⁸ Film and television period dramas are, along with historical fiction, one of the ways in which we access, engage with and experience the past. This means that there are implications if a screen adaptation represents lesbian and queer history differently from how they are represented in the novels. Adaptations of Waters' novels have mostly been responded to in terms of their faithfulness or otherwise to the gender and sexual representations of her characters, and most of this attention has focused on the BBC TV adaptation of *Tipping the Velvet*, starring Rachael Stirling and Keeley Hawes as Nancy and Kitty.

Most of the criticism of this production has been directed at Stirling's casting as Nancy, with the actor's 'feminine', 'pretty' and 'girlish' appearance rendering absurd the scenes where other characters accept her as male.⁹ Heather Emmens argues that this rewrites and repackages the gender and sexual politics of the novel for a male heterosexual audience:

It is this specific representation of lesbian characters as feminine women that I call *femme-inisation*. [...] Televisual femme-inisation makes lesbian characters virtually indistinguishable from the conventional heterosexual women on television who are coded as objects of heterosexual male desire. By femme-inising its protagonist, the BBC serial brings Nancy's appearance into line with conventions of female desirability

⁸ Sarah Waters, live webchat, *The Guardian*, 13th July 2011
<<https://www.theguardian.com/books/booksblog/2011/jul/13/live-webchat-sarah-waters>>
[accessed 5th October 2019].

⁹ Emmens, 'Taming the Velvet', p. 136.

even as it forecloses on alternative (and thus ‘undesirable’) butch depictions of her character.¹⁰

The *femme-inisation* of Nancy raises a number of questions in terms of the role that lesbian historical fiction has to play in Doan and Waters’ project of retrospection. They do not consider the possibility of such novels being adapted for television, or what the implications of this might be, and their article is largely concerned with lesbian fiction for a lesbian readership. Waters’ novels have had a reception and an afterlife far beyond these parameters. Is it a good thing that her novels are so widely read by heterosexual readers, and that they have been adapted successfully for similarly large audiences – or does this dilute their meaning for the readers for which Waters’ first novel was originally intended? If her characters are ‘femme-inised’ in this way, do the adaptations risk undoing some of the work the novels do in relation to filling in the gaps of lesbian and queer history?

Like historical novels, period dramas reflect the gender and sexual politics of the time in which they are produced, as well as those of the time in which they are set. This is particularly relevant in relation to the *Sun* newspaper’s salacious coverage of the BBC adaptation of *Tipping the Velvet*, of which Emmens is also highly critical. Referring to a photograph in which two models were dressed in highly sexualised quasi-Victorian underwear, Emmens argues that the cross-dressing element of the novel is entirely absent from this visual representation, as ‘male impersonation [...] does not figure in the ‘ultimate male fantasy’, and so must therefore ‘be omitted from the tabloid ideal.’¹¹ The serial was released in 2002, at a time when feminism did not have the kind of cultural presence it has had more recently. It also coincided with the 2002

¹⁰ Emmens, ‘Taming the Velvet’, p. 136.

¹¹ Emmens, ‘Taming the Velvet’, p. 139.

World Cup; one of Emmens' further objections relates to the information the *Sun* provided for its male heterosexual readers about when football viewers should switch over for the *Tipping the Velvet* sex scenes. On the one hand, we might like to think that, nearly twenty years later, the media response to such a TV series might be less sensational and more enlightened; on the other, the first thing the *Sun* did in a 2018 article about Keeley Hawes' role in the BBC series *Bodyguard* was remind its readers, with a still as a visual aid, of her 'steamy lesbian romp in 2002 drama *Tipping the Velvet*'.¹²

Laura Wade's 2015 theatrical adaptation of the novel for the Lyric Theatre in Hammersmith more closely reflects the novel's gender and sexual politics. In a nod to the Lyric's past, the play is 'framed as a music-hall production', with a male actor playing the role of chairman, complete with gavel.¹³ This might appear to frame Nancy's experiences through the male gaze, but, as Claire O'Callaghan points out, he hands his gavel to Nancy at the end of the play in a symbolic ceding of power to the lesbian heroine, the acknowledgement of her right to dictate her own destiny.¹⁴ The critical reception of the play reveals a great deal about how *Tipping the Velvet* has been reduced to little more than its sexual content through its afterlife on screen and stage. Critics were preoccupied with the representation of lesbian sex in Wade's production to the exclusion of everything else, raising the question of how much of this can be attributed to the hype and sensationalism surrounding the BBC TV adaptation thirteen years earlier. Much of the concern with the play's perceived lack of sexual content focused on the following scene from the play:

¹² *The Sun*, 30th August 2018 <<https://www.thesun.co.uk/tvandshowbiz/7137591/keeley-hawes-bodyguard-lesbian-sex-scene-tipping-velvet/>> [accessed 4th January 2020].

¹³ Claire O'Callaghan, *Sarah Waters: Gender and Sexual Politics* (London: Bloomsbury, 2017), p. 183.

¹⁴ O'Callaghan, *Gender and Sexual Politics*, p. 195.

*Nancy and Kitty have sex for the first time, in the form of an acrobatic aerial silks routine. It's beautiful and tender but also taut and urgent. The girls end up in bedsheets and each other's arms.*¹⁵

Two critics who reviewed this production complained that this scene in particular, and the sex in the play in general, was not faithful to the novel. Writing for the *Guardian*, Susannah Clapp objects that:

The sex is not raunchy enough. [...] When the ladies spin round on high – a circusy feat emblematic of their giddy bedroom passion – it looks like a fey cop-out. [...] The ardour and vigour of the original goes missing.¹⁶

When Clapp praises ‘the ardour and vigour of the original’, she means, we assume, the novel, but I suggest here that the notoriety of the TV production is such that the boundary between the novel and the BBC series has become blurred in terms of *Tipping the Velvet*’s afterlife in the cultural imagination. Dominic Cavendish in the *Telegraph* is rather unconvincing when he says that he is ‘not suggesting that [he] was expecting or hoping that this new stage adaptation [...] would have the soft-porn sheen of an Emmanuelle film’, but is ‘surprised that a book which drips with Sapphic desire – nay, spills over with the fervour of awakening lust and sexual abandonment – should be so coyly translated to the stage.’¹⁷ The blurring of the novel and the BBC series is evident here: it seems reasonable enough to argue that the novel ‘drips with

¹⁵ Laura Wade, *Tipping the Velvet* (London: Oberon Books, 2015), p. 39.

¹⁶ Susannah Clapp, ‘Tipping the Velvet review – top talent, shame about the sex’, *The Guardian*, 4th October 2015. <<https://www.theguardian.com/stage/2015/oct/04/tipping-the-velvet-review-lyric-hammersmith-laura-wade>> [accessed 8th October 2015].

¹⁷ Dominic Cavendish, ‘Tipping the Velvet, Lyric Hammersmith, review: snogging aplenty but still too coy’, *The Telegraph*, 29th September 2015. <<https://www.telegraph.co.uk/theatre/what-to-see/tipping-the-velvet-lyric-hammersmith-review/>> [accessed 8th October 2015].

Sapphic desire', but the phrase 'the soft-porn sheen of an Emmanuelle film' describes Andrew Davies' adaptation far more accurately than it does Waters' original. Cavendish effectively gives away his conflating of the two when he complains that the BBC adaptation, while being 'less outré than was at first reported, was a far racier affair than this.'¹⁸ Cavendish and Clapp might insist that the novel itself is their reference point for the sex scenes in the play, but how they actually link the two betrays their lack of understanding of the novel. I saw this production twice, and to me the 'aerial silks' scene was absolutely faithful both to Waters' preoccupation with performance and theatricality in relation to sexual identity, and to Laura Wade's decision to present the events of the play through the music hall framing device. What Cavendish's and Clapp's reviews disclose is their sense of disappointment that the adaptation did not deliver sex scenes like those in the BBC series. Cavendish's rather infantile sarcasm is symptomatic of the same sniggering-and-giggling attitude to sex that can be seen in the way the BBC adaptation makes Nancy and Kitty's love-making 'into a farcical romp', with 'the use of the camera as a comic device [detracting] from the love-making between these two women.'¹⁹ The possible displacement of the novel by the television adaptation in the public imagination has particular implications for the recuperative potential of lesbian historical fiction.

The adaptations thus highlight how Waters' novels continue to be caught up in the palimpsestic process of the sedimentation and compacting of their own histories. Sarah Dillon's argument about the involutedness of the palimpsest – the highly complex relationship between its different layers, according to the palimpsestuous model of the metaphor – continues to be pertinent here. The theatrical adaptations of Waters' work speak back to the novels in a different way from the screen adaptations, perhaps because they cater for a more specialist

¹⁸ Cavendish, *Tipping the Velvet* review.

¹⁹ Pauline MacPherson, "'Fictions can change. It's only the facts that trap us": Images of female sexuality from *Oranges to Velvet*', *Women: A Cultural Review* 19 (2008), p. 271.

‘literary’ audience, and so can make more inventive and innovative decisions about how to present certain aspects of the novels’ ideas about history. This particularly applies to Hattie Naylor’s 2016 adaptation of *The Night Watch* for the Royal Exchange Theatre in Manchester, which made its defining feature the use of a doubly revolving stage set to reflect the novel’s reverse chronology, with the inner and outer sections of the circle moving in different directions. Sam Wollaston of the *Guardian* is critical of the BBC’s approach to the temporal structure of the novel, pointing to ‘the slight clumsiness of the video rewinding effect to show we’re going back in time’.²⁰ The play’s stage set, however, was positively received. Implicitly highlighting the importance of the novel’s status as a work of historical fiction, Paul Vallely of the *Independent* praised the set design for ‘cleverly underscor[ing] the narrative technique. [...] It conveys the passage of time set back-to-front. It allows emotional distance to open up between unmoving characters.’²¹ Similarly, Susannah Clapp observed that ‘Georgia Lowe’s slowly revolving design makes a virtue of being in the round. These lives are not followed in linear fashion’.²² Also writing for the *Guardian*, Alfred Hickling argued that ‘the continually evolving grey platter [...] evokes time unfolding in reverse and suggests the characters are all condemned to their personal circles of hell’.²³ These reviews all suggest a deep *literary* understanding of Waters’ novel. This was not the case with the theatrical adaptation of *Tipping the Velvet*, which again suggests that the BBC series has permanently distorted the lens through which this novel is responded to and received.

²⁰ Sam Wollaston, ‘*The Night Watch* turned sirens, fear and desire back to front but left me unmoved’, *The Guardian*, 12th July 2011. <<https://www.theguardian.com/tv-and-radio/2011/jul/12/tv-review-the-night-watch>> [accessed 5th October 2015].

²¹ Paul Vallely, ‘*The Night Watch*, The Royal Exchange, review: Be patient, this burns with furious passion by the end’, *The Independent*, 29th May 2016. <<https://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/theatre-dance/reviews/the-night-watch-the-royal-exchange-review-be-patient-this-burns-with-furious-passion-by-the-end-a7047846.html>> [accessed 20th September 2016].

²² Susannah Clapp, ‘*The Night Watch* review – the swish of the blackout curtain’, *The Guardian*, 29th May 2016. <<https://www.theguardian.com/stage/2016/may/29/night-watch-review-royal-exchange-manchester-sarah-waters>> [accessed 20th September 2016].

²³ Alfred Hickling, ‘*The Night Watch* review – captures the heart of Sarah Waters’ love story’, *The Guardian*, 25th May 2016. <<https://www.theguardian.com/stage/2016/may/25/the-night-watch-review-adaptation-sarah-waters>> [accessed 20th September 2016].

There is one adaptation that seems to illustrate more clearly than the others how little control writers have over how their works are interpreted and consumed: Park Chan-Wook's 2017 film *The Handmaiden*. Park transfers *Fingersmith*'s setting to Korea in the 1930s under Japanese occupation, which, in Waters' words, makes the film 'much more about colonialism: that very fraught relationship between Korea and Japan.'²⁴ Sue becomes Sook-hee, a Korean seamstress, and Maud becomes wealthy Japanese heiress Hikedo; the film is 'atmospherically set in a mansion which is part Western gothic, part Japanese, with rooms divided by sliding paper doors through which the unscrupulous can snoop on the unwary.'²⁵ In terms of its critical reception, *The Handmaiden* is the most controversial and contested of the adaptations of Waters' work, even more so than the BBC's *Tipping the Velvet*. In *The Guardian*, Benjamin Lee praised the film while acknowledging that 'the spectre of an older male director guiding two young female actors through graphic sex scenes has led some at Cannes to compare *The Handmaiden* with previous Palme d'Or winner *Blue is the Warmest Colour*, and to criticise it in the same way.'²⁶ In her review for the *New Yorker*, Jia Tolentino underscores the contradictory nature of the film's gender and sexual politics, praising Park's decision to 'cede power to the women at a point when Waters unrolled another series of wraps and reveals', but also noting how the director 'remains fixated on role play, both in terms of sex and deception'.²⁷ She also quotes Laura Miller in *Slate*, whose comments echo those of Emmens and MacPherson in relation to

²⁴ Claire Armitstead, interview with Sarah Waters, 'The Handmaiden turns pornography into a spectacle – but it's true to my novel', *The Guardian*, 8th April 2017. <<https://www.theguardian.com/film/2017/apr/08/sarah-waters-the-handmaiden-turns-pornography-into-a-spectacle-but-its-true-to-my-novel>> [accessed 13th June 2019].

²⁵ Armitstead (2017).

²⁶ Benjamin Lee, 'The Handmaiden review – Park Chan-Wook's lurid lesbian potboiler simmers with sexual tension', *The Guardian*, 14th May 2016. <<https://www.theguardian.com/film/2016/may/14/the-handmaiden-review-park-chan-wooks-lurid-lesbian-potboiler-simmers-with-sexual-tension>> [accessed 22nd September 2016].

²⁷ Jia Tolentino, 'The Handmaiden and the freedom women only find with one another', *The New Yorker*, 29th October 2016. <<https://www.newyorker.com/culture/jia-tolentino/the-handmaiden-and-the-freedom-women-find-only-with-one-another>> [accessed 19th March 2020].

the BBC's *Tipping the Velvet*: 'the maid and the mistress fall back into the tired visual clichés of pornographic lesbianism, their bodies offered up for the camera's delectation in a carefully arranged exhibition that would fit right into Uncle's collection.'²⁸ Tolentino concludes that, on balance, 'it's lovely to have a man be so faithful to the deepest motivations of Waters' novel *Fingersmith*.'²⁹ These comments echo Waters' own insistence that the film, despite making pornography 'into a spectacle', is 'true to [her] novel', a perspective that is at odds with some of the comments referenced here.³⁰ *The Handmaid* in particular, then, illustrates the extent to which the publication of a novel is merely the beginning of the cycles of meaning and interpretation in which it will always be caught up. These adaptations continue the processes of inscription, imitation and superimposition that I have explored in relation to Waters novels: there is never any end to this process, just as there is no limit to the ways in which a historical novel can be interpreted and adapted.

²⁸ Laura Miller, 'The Handmaid', *Slate*, 20th October 2016. <<https://slate.com/culture/2016/10/park-chan-wooks-the-handmaid-based-on-sarah-waters-fingersmith-reviewed.html>> [accessed 19th March 2020].

²⁹ Tolentino (2016).

³⁰ Armitstead (2017).

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